Reading Comprehension and Reading Strategies

- How Teachers Interpret and Work Towards the Reading Goals for Year 9

Läsförståelse och lässtrategier

- Hur lärare tolkar och arbetar mot läsmålen för nionde klass

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to examine how teachers perceive the reading goals stated in the syllabus for English, and how they work towards the goals for year 9 that emphasize reading comprehension and reading strategies.

Reading comprehension in English among students in year 9 had weakened in the period in-between the latest national survey of the Swedish school-system NU03, which was carried out in 2003, and the national survey done in 1992. The period in-between these two surveys saw the introduction of a new curriculum, a new syllabus and a new grading system. Thus questions arise about the role and status of the new syllabus, and how the teachers perceive the goals for reading and choose to work towards these.

Through the use of qualitative interviews, this paper investigates how three teachers at a secondary school in the south of Sweden interpret the goals to attain, and how they work on increasing the reading comprehension and improving the reading strategies of their students.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, reading strategies, interpretations, assessment of reading
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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

2003 saw the largest national evaluation ever of the Swedish compulsory school system, NU03. 7000 students and their 378 teachers in 120 schools participated in the evaluation (Skolverket, NU03 13). NU03 aimed at giving a comprehensive overview of the attainment of the goals stated in the latest versions of syllabuses and to evaluate the use of the new grading system, the new grading criteria and the new course plans that were established in 1995, and later revised in 2000. NU03 also intended to investigate changes that had occurred since the last national evaluation NU92 that was carried out in 1992, before the introduction of the new curriculum, the new syllabuses and the new grading system and grading criteria. The evaluation also aimed at addressing the need for developing measures within the addressed areas (28). The central themes when investigating the development of the subject English were attitudes toward the subject, student influence in the learning and teaching processes, skills, self-evaluation, results from different student groups, the importance and role of the teacher, and issues on the attainment of the goals in the national syllabus (41).

Reading comprehension was one of three skills tested. The 700 students in year 9 that participated in the reading comprehension tests in NU03 achieved a somewhat lower average score than the students in NU92. The number of students attaining “weak, and very poor comprehension” in 1992 were about 25 %, while one third of the students achieved a “well expressed and detailed comprehension of the text.” In NU03 the numbers were the opposite. Roughly one third of the students were considered very poor readers, while 25 % achieved a very good comprehension (Skolverket, NU03 51).

Reading comprehension in English among students in year 9 seemed to have weakened in the ten-year period in-between the two national evaluations, and since the introduction of the current curriculum, syllabus, grading system and grading criteria. These results were not necessarily a direct result of the changes that had taken place in
the school system in-between the two evaluations. However, since one of the main intentions of NU03 was to detect changes between 1992 and 2003, the results lead to questions concerning how the current syllabus for English, and the current grading system and grading criteria introduced in 1994 and 1995, are interpreted and used by teachers when they teach reading to their students.

In early 2009 the Swedish parliament once again decided about the need for a new grading system. The new system will be implemented in Swedish schools in 2011 or 2012 at the earliest (Riksdag och Departement). On January 10th, 2009, Skolverket was also given the assignment by the Swedish government to construct new syllabuses and course plans in connection to the new grading system (Regeringen & Regeringskansliet). In the political debate about whether there has been a need for a new grading system, potential weaknesses of the current syllabuses have been a main issue. Proponents of a new grading system have claimed that the goals in the current syllabuses are too vague. This degree project aims at investigating in detail how the reading goals in the syllabus for English are interpreted by teachers, and how the teachers choose to work towards these. The results may also show if the notion that certain guidelines in the current syllabuses are too vague is justified.

1.2 Aim and research questions

This dissertation looks at reading goals from the teacher’s perspective. The aim is to investigate how teachers at compulsory school perceive the goals relating to reading that are stated in the national syllabus for English, and how they choose to work towards these goals. The research questions of this dissertation are:

- How do three teachers of English at a secondary school in the south of Sweden interpret the goals for reading for year 9?
- How do they work towards having their students achieve these goals?
The focus of this dissertation is placed on the goals to attain that are connected to reading. These goals emphasize reading comprehension and reading strategies. The limited guidelines addressing students’ reading in the syllabus are open to interpretation. Thus what this text highlights is how the teachers perceive the goals for reading in the syllabus, and how they work towards helping their students to increase their reading comprehension and improve their reading strategies. In connection to promoting such skills, the ways in which the teachers assess their students with regards to reading comprehension and reading strategies is also discussed, since such assessment eventually serves as the basis when the teachers decide on the final grades at the end of year 9.

1.3 Lpo 94

In 1994 the current curriculum Lpo 94 was introduced in Swedish schools. Ingrid Carlgren, a professor in educational science who helped develop the new curriculum and the new grading system, says that the formation of the curriculum and the grading system was based on a radically different view, not only on how a grading system and its various criteria should be constructed, but also on what grading itself really meant (Carlgren 14). This was clearly reflected in the shift from a norm-referenced grading system to the current criterion-based system. The previous norm-referenced grading system was constructed so that every grade level, ranging from 1-5, should represent a specific percentage of the total grades in a class. Thus in the norm-referenced grading system the final grades were based on comparisons between the different students’ achievements. In the current criterion-based grading system introduced in 1995 the students’ competences are instead compared to specific goals that all students should have attained in order to pass, and specific criteria address the different skills needed in order to receive a higher grade. These goals and criteria are stated in the various syllabuses.

One important aspect connected to the introduction of the new curriculum and the new syllabuses was the promotion of local work plans by Skolverket. While the syllabuses
should serve as guidelines containing more general qualities in the students’ learning, the local work plans would include the actual content of the teaching (Carlgren 22). The local work plans were to be developed and acted upon by teachers and other staff at the school, in close contact with representatives of the students, and under the supervision of the principal. Local work plans were a requirement in all schools up until the publication of the 2001/02 educational development plan (Utvecklingsplanen). The government then chose to remove this requirement (Carlgren 18).

The teachers interviewed in this degree project work at a school that has adopted a local work plan. At the moment of writing, this plan is being revised in order to fit the shaping of the new Individual Development Plan, IUP (individuell utvecklingsplan).

1.4 The Syllabus for English

1.4.1 The goals to aim for
Local work plans are linked to the part of the syllabus entitled The goals to aim for. These goals are connected to the development and direction of the teaching (Carlgren 19), and in connection to reading these goals stress that the students should develop:

– their ability to read different types of texts for pleasure and to obtain information and knowledge,
– their ability to use aids and critically examine sources of information,

Since the goals to aim for serve as guidelines that provide the focus of the development and direction of the teaching, these goals are vital for the teachers when considering the content of the teaching that should be reflected in the local work plans. In addition to these goals there are other goals in the syllabus dealing with students’ language development and learning.
1.4.2 Goals to attain

The goals to attain at the end of year 9 are connected to the evaluation of the results achieved by the students (Carlgren 18).

The two goals that students should have been attained at the end of year 9 are described as follows. They should:

– be able to read and assimilate the contents of relatively simple literature and other narratives, descriptions and texts putting forward argument in subjects they are familiar with,
– be able to choose and use aids when reading texts, writing and in other language activities,

The first of the two goals that the students should have attained at the end of year 9 in connection to reading concerns reading comprehension. It specifically states that the reading material that students should be able to read and assimilate should be of a relatively simple nature. Moreover, the students should be familiar with the contents of the texts. The second goal addresses reading strategies and aids. However, unlike the first goal addressing reading comprehension, this second goal is less clear, and it does not state what kind of reading strategies and aids that should be promoted.

1.4.3 Focus of the assessment and evaluation

The part in the syllabus entitled The focus of the assessment and evaluation describes the skills that form the basis of the grading of the students (Carlgren 19). The evaluation of the “receptive skills” should focus on “the student’s ability to understand spoken and written English.” The student should be able to “comprehend the general ideas and the context” and to be able to “draw conclusions about the purpose of a text or something being spoken.”

In connection to reading, the student should also be able to understand “texts of various kinds and various levels of difficulty.” The assessment and evaluation of the reading skills of the student also places emphasis on “to what extent the student with the help of
various strategies is able to adjust the reading according to the text type and purpose of the reading.

This part of the syllabus addresses aspects of reading that should be taken into consideration when grading students, some of which are not dealt with in the goals to attain. However, in the criteria for the higher grades in connection to reading mentioned in the same part of the syllabus, one does not find most of these requirements.

In order to receive a VG (Very Good) the only specific criterion is that:

- *The student reads, assimilates and comments easy texts, both facts literature and fiction*

To attain an MVG (Pass with Distinction) it is necessary that:

- *The student assimilates the content of texts of various length, comments on these and draws conclusions*

When teachers plan how to work towards increasing reading comprehension and promoting good reading strategies there are few clear guidelines and no recommendations in the syllabus. Although the section entitled the focus of the assessment and evaluation talks about other aspects of the reading process, the criteria for achieving higher grades are even more unclear than the goals to attain. In fact, the only concrete aspect of reading that seems to be addressed in all the different parts of the syllabus is reading comprehension. Reading strategies are clearly not given the same emphasis in the syllabus as a whole.

How can such general goals as stated in the goals to attain serve as guidance when teachers work towards increasing the reading comprehension and improving the reading strategies of their students, and how are students’ attainment of these goals assessed by teachers?
2. Theory

This chapter provides the theoretical framework on reading deemed necessary for the aim of this dissertation. Furthermore, the theories on reading presented are put into context by relating these to the syllabus for English.

2.1 Defining reading

Reading can be defined in multiple ways. In the research literature on reading in a second/foreign language there are different suggestions. Urquhart and Weir, in their book *Reading in a Second Language*, define reading as “dealing with language messages in written or printed form” (14). They also choose to narrow the activity of reading down by excluding the reading of music, maps or mathematical symbols. According to the authors, there are several reasons for restricting the meaning of the term reading when using it as a basis for discussions on reading in a second language and in second language research. First of all, the process of reading addresses certain linguistic competence that is more immediate and more extensive than those addressed in other language competence areas. Secondly, in the classroom, a distinction is made, consciously or unconsciously, between reading and other activities of symbol processing. Finally, the authors also claim that on a whole this use of the term seems to agree with people’s everyday use of the word (14-15).

When the word reading is used in this dissertation it is the definition made by Urquhart & Weir, with the limitations of such a definition, that is being used. Such a definition correlates to how the syllabus views text as “print-based”, not including images. Thus reading in this case only refers to the reading of such print-based texts. By acknowledging that there are important reasons to limit the definition of reading, potential differing views on what the term reading can include will hopefully be avoided. Furthermore, this dissertation also recognizes that in order to understand reading as product and process one should acknowledge that the phenomenon of
reading includes a combination of skills and abilities that readers bring to the text when they begin to read (Grabe 51).

Reading is not solely an individual cognitive process. Especially to younger children it is an activity that often takes place in groups and is led by a teacher. Thus it should also often be regarded as a social and interactive activity (Guthrie & Hall 100). A sociolinguistic view of reading takes into account that as a social process, reading is used to “establish, structure and maintain social relationships between and among people” and as a linguistic process, it is used to “communicate intentions and meanings, not only between an author and a reader but also by people involved in a reading event” (Bloom & Green 397).

Although it is not possible to ignore the social aspects of reading in a paper addressing the subject (Urquhart & Weir 8), this paper focuses on the cognitive and psycholinguistic aspects of reading. There are important reasons for this. Firstly, the scope of the theory section in this paper would have been too extensive if it also included a social or sociolinguistic approach on reading. Secondly, and most importantly, the syllabus for English in secondary school does not really seem to address such sociolinguistic aspects as stated above when setting the goals for what the students should have achieved at the end of year 9 in connection to reading. These goals are more steered toward the individual student’s interaction and comprehension of texts, and the student’s ability to use various strategies when reading. However, as for the social contexts influencing students in their reading development, such as “the home, the school and other institutions, peers and student-teacher interactions” (Grabe 54), these might be factors to take into consideration when investigating how the teachers interviewed in this study choose to work toward the goals to attain in the syllabus.

The use of the word *language* in this dissertation is also in accordance with how Urquhart & Weir use the word when discussing it in second language research. Language in this case refers to the various linguistic languages of the world, thus excluding mathematical or computer languages (16). Naturally, for this dissertation it is solely English, being taught as a foreign language, that is in focus.
2.2 Reading as product

When adapting a cognitive and psycholinguistic view on reading it is important to
distinguish between reading as product and reading as process. While process deals with
the interaction between a reader and the text, product is the understanding or
comprehension that the reader reaches at the end of a process (Alderson 3-4).

2.2.1 Reading comprehension

The rise in interest in the concept of comprehension in the late 1960’s led to the former
idea of reading being a process in which the reader was mainly involved in decoding
printed words into spoken words was questioned (Urquhart & Weir 20). Comprehension
seemed a more inclusive term that incorporated all the different cognitive processes
involved. Thus comprehension became an important concept to cognitive psychologists,
psycholinguistics and educationalists interested in the phenomenon of reading (Ibid.).

According to Frank Smith (2004), learning and comprehension are widely regarded as a
set of skills that reflect learning and comprehension processes in the brain. However,
when examining the process of reading from a psycholinguistic viewpoint Smith
explains comprehension as “a state rather than a set of skills or processes” (13), in
which the reader relates new information to what is already known to the reader.
Comprehension is explained as “the interpretation of experience” (326), and this state
of comprehension is equivalent to that of learning. Absence of comprehension
according to Smith is not a lack of skills or the break-down of a process but “it is a
state, to which we normally give the name confusion” (8). By depicting comprehension
and learning as the same state in which the reader interprets his experience by relating
new information to old information this state can be viewed as the product and outcome
of a process. In the words of Urquhart & Weir “Comprehension is a useful term to
contrast to decoding; otherwise it is best perhaps taken as the product resulting from a
particular reading task, and evaluated as such” (88).

The syllabus for English does not put the same amount of emphasis on the procedural
aspects of reading as it does on the product of reading. The focus of the assessment and
evaluation addresses the importance of reading strategies more clearly than the goals to attain. However, this ability to aid and enhance the reading process is not premiered as one of the skills when aiming for a higher grade. As for the goals that the students should have attained at the end of year 9 in connection to reading, it is also the goal addressing reading comprehension that to a certain extent defines more clearly what is expected of the students, by stating what text types that students should be able to read.

**The Common European Framework (CEF) on reading comprehension**

The Common European Framework (CEF) is a document put together by the Council of Europe to be used as a guideline when describing and assessing the achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe. The document includes recommendations to be used in the development of language syllabuses, guidelines for curricula, examinations and textbooks. In November 2001 a European Union Council resolution recommended that this document should be used in the EU-member states as a guideline when setting up language programs and systems of assessment and evaluation of language competencies (Council of Europe, *Language Policy Division*). When assessing language achievements according to the CEF there are three categories of language users to which a grading-scale comprised of six levels is attached. The three different levels of language users are: basic users, independent users and proficient users (Council of Europe, *CEF* 23). Reading for an overall reading comprehension, is one of five purposes in connection to reading for which the CEF provides scales of assessment when describing the achievements and characteristics of different language users. The other four goals are reading for correspondence, reading for orientation, reading for information and argument, and reading for instructions (68).

When comparing the reading characteristics of an independent and proficient user in the CEF with the criteria for the higher grades in the focus of the assessment and evaluation in the syllabus for English, one clearly notices the lack of specific abilities to account for in the latter of these two documents. A more able student in year 9 might obviously not have to be at the same level as an independent or proficient user according to CEF standards. These more advanced levels might as a whole probably be more in line with the characteristics of learners of English at upper secondary school or in adult-
education. However, the CEF is context-free, which means that “a common scale should not be produced specifically for, let us say, the school context and then applied to adults, or vice-versa” (Council of Europe, CEF 21). Thus certain reading comprehension characteristics of an independent or proficient user could probably be applicable to an advanced year 9 student. Some of these include the need of independent reading, the need of an active reading vocabulary, being able to appreciate subtle distinctions of style, and the ability to detect implicit meanings in texts (69). In comparison to such reading comprehension characteristics, the goals set in the focus of the assessment and evaluation in the syllabus in connection to reading comprehension, seem very vague. The criterion concerning the ability to “comment” and “draw conclusions” from what is read does not seem to form a solid and extensive enough explanation to what more advanced reading comprehension should, or might, encompass. Thus, teachers seem to be left without concrete guidelines on how to assess those students that aim for the higher grades.

The goal to attain that addresses the reading comprehension for year 9 deals with the comprehension of “relatively simple literature and other narratives, descriptions and texts putting forward argument in subjects they are familiar with”. The reading comprehension characteristics of a basic user according to the CEF do not differ that much from this goal. However, there are certain characteristics of a basic user in the CEF that are not dealt with in the goals in the syllabus for English, that may be applicable to students in year 9. These include the importance of a “high frequency vocabulary” and the ability to understand “high frequency everyday or job-related language” in order to be able to comprehend basic narratives mainly consisting of “short, simple texts on familiar matters” (Council of Europe, CEF 69).

One might conclude that such skills are embedded in the ability to understand texts of a more simple nature. However, since the CEF mentions the importance of these abilities in connection to an overall reading comprehension, it might be preferable to acknowledge that these skills can also be regarded as somewhat separate entities that can be taught, learned and developed separately, while forming important aspects of reading comprehension. Reading texts that reflect a more authentic and everyday use of
the language and doing vocabulary exercises are some learning activities that might be supported by the guidelines in the CEF, and that could be used in connection to the goal to attain that deals with reading comprehension. A thorough support of the CEF when constructing the reading goals for year 9 may have given teachers a somewhat clearer notion of how to perceive the idea of reading comprehension, and how to work towards increasing the reading comprehension of the students.

2.3 Reading as process

A number of components are included in the process of reading, and different reading models give us different perspectives on how the reading process as a whole should be defined from a cognitive and psycholinguistic viewpoint. This dissertation deals with those aspects of the reading process deemed necessary to discuss in order to evaluate the goals and criteria connected to reading in the syllabus for English.

2.3.1 Reading skills

There is much confusion in the literature regarding the differences between reading skills and reading strategies (Urquhart & Weir 96). Since one of the aims of this dissertation is to discuss perceptions of reading strategies, and how the use of these is promoted in the EFL classroom, it is necessary to distinguish between the two terms. According to Urquhart & Weir reading skills are text-oriented and explain the cognitive abilities that the reader uses when interacting with a text, such as the ability to see and read linguistic or textual information. Reading strategies on the other hand, are reader-oriented and concern strategies and techniques that the reader uses during the process of reading in order to make learning more efficient and to enhance comprehension (96-98).

2.3.2 Reading strategies

Definition of strategy

The general guidelines in the syllabus for English do not define the word strategy in connection to reading, neither do they include what primary kinds of aid that the student
should be able to use in the process of reading. Aid, in this paper, is connected to both the various external “tool(s) that help(s) someone do something” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 31), and other strategies used by the reader in order to facilitate learning and comprehension of texts. This dissertation acknowledges that although the second reading goal for year 9 only mentions the word aid and not strategies, these two words are interconnected. Furthermore, the part of the syllabus entitled the focus of the assessment and evaluation specifically mentions the word strategies when deciding what factors to take into consideration when assessing and evaluating the reading skills of the students. Although aids and strategies are seen as being connected, the latter of these words has a wider and more complex set of connotations in connection to strategies used during the process of reading. Thus the use of the word strategy in this paper needs to be defined.

The lack of consensus on how reading strategies should be defined and categorized has led many researchers to describe such strategies in very neutral terms (Lundahl 207). From the five different kinds of strategies proposed by Davies (1995), Lundahl concludes that reading strategies involve: solving problems when meeting obstacles in the reading process; enhancing the reading by using different steps in order to read more carefully, and thus get more out from the reading; an enhanced awareness about the possibilities of reading (208. My translation).

A further point of dispute in the literature on reading in a second language is whether the term strategy should only refer to deliberate and conscious behavior or if it also should include unconscious behavior. Florence Davies says that a strategy should include any “physical or mental action used consciously or unconsciously with the intention of facilitating text comprehension and/or learning” (Davies 50). The Common European Framework, however, adopts what is called “an action-oriented approach”, in which a strategy “is any organized, purposeful and regulated line of action chosen by an individual to carry out a task which he or she sets for himself or herself or with which he or she is confronted” (Council of Europe, CEF 10). When investigating the perceptions of reading strategies and the promotion of such by the three teachers interviewed in this paper, it is probably best to accept the idea that strategies employed
by the learner in the reading process can be viewed by these teachers as both conscious and unconscious lines of action.

**Types of strategies**

In order to provide a more concrete framework of reading strategies the typology of learning strategies proposed by Rebecca L. Oxford (1990) will be used. Singal (2001) uses this categorization of strategies when discussing reading strategies of L2 readers, since within the broad context of reading strategies these learning strategies offer a useful and comprehensive set of strategies (3). The learning strategies proposed by Rebecca L. Oxford are applicable to all four language skills: speaking, writing, listening and reading. Her categorization will act as the framework when discussing the notions on reading strategies of the teachers interviewed in this paper, and their work towards improving the reading strategies of their students. The different strategy types are:

- Cognitive strategies (manipulating and transforming the language)
- Compensation strategies (making up for inadequate grammar and vocabulary)
- Memory strategies (remembering and retrieving information)
- Metacognitive strategies (coordinating the learning process)
- Affective strategies (promoting motivation, dealing with emotions, attitudes and values)
- Social strategies (involving others in the reading process)

The first three categories are direct strategies in that they “directly involve the target language” (Oxford 37). The three other categories are indirect strategies because “they support and manage language without (in many instances) directly involving the target language” (135).

Cognitive strategies in the reading process include: practicing the target language by repeating; receiving messages in the text by searching for main ideas or specific details or by using resources such as dictionaries and wordlists; analyzing and translating expressions; creating structure by taking notes or summarizing. Guessing by using linguistic clues or other clues in the text are known as compensation strategies. Memory
strategies are those where the reader remembers and retrieves information. This can be done by creating mental images through grouping or association, and by applying images by using imagery, semantic mappings or keywords. Other memory strategies are reviewing, and employing action by using physical response or sensation or other techniques.

Among the three categories of indirect strategies are metacognitive strategies. The aspects of metacognition with regards to reading strategies are: knowing what the strategy is, how it works and why it is being used (Lawrence 56). Metacognitive strategies include centering learning by overviewing and linking with already known material, arranging and planning learning by organizing, planning and setting goals and objectives, and evaluating learning through self-monitoring and self-evaluation. The affective strategies are those techniques that are specifically employed to lower anxiety, encouraging oneself, and becoming aware of and checking the emotional status in the reading process. Finally, social strategies are those that include other individuals in the reading process and refer to the cooperation with others, asking questions and empathizing with others.

This categorization views aid and strategy as closely connected, and does for example place external tools of aids, such as dictionaries, in the category of cognitive strategies. This is in line with the interpretation of the goals in the syllabus adapted in this paper. Aid is a more specific term that reflects certain techniques used in the reading process; Strategy is the generic term referring to all techniques, conscious or unconscious, that the reader employs when reading.

2.3.3 Reading purposes and types of reading
People read for a variety of reasons. A preliminary summary of different reading purposes according to Davies (1995) are: for pleasure; for a general impression; for organizing reading and study; for learning content or procedures; for language learning. Davies further emphasizes the connection between reading purposes and types of reading. When the reader is clear about the purpose of the reading task he should be able to consider what type of reading that is best suited for the task. Types of reading
concern the reading behavior, and in classroom settings, types of reading are “the different behaviors that students are encouraged to practice in the reading classroom” (Davies 135).

*The goals to aim for* in the syllabus for English stress that the text material in English classes should be comprised of various types of text, serving different purposes. According to these goals the students should “develop their ability to read different types of texts for pleasure and to obtain information and knowledge.” If there is a close connection between reading purpose and type of reading, what types of reading do these goals promote, and are such different types of reading behavior reflected in the goals that the students should have achieved at the end of year 9?

Reading for pleasure is connected to *extensive reading*. Extensive reading is “an approach to the teaching and learning of second language reading in which learners read large quantities of books and other materials that are well within their linguistic competence” (Day & Bamford 13), and where learners themselves select what they want to read (8). The purpose of extensive reading is mainly about developing fluent second language reading and thus concerns aspects such as “a large sight vocabulary; a wide general vocabulary; and knowledge of the target language, the world, and text types” (16).

Reading for knowledge might seem a bit vague. However, whether knowledge refers to learning about language features or attaining knowledge about a specific subject presented in a text, *intensive reading* is probably best suited for any of these purposes. Intensive reading can be defined as a teaching method in which “students normally work with short texts with close guidance from the teacher” (Renandya & Jacobs 296). The intensive study of texts can be a way for learners to develop knowledge of different language features and how to control reading strategies (Nation 25). If the aim is to only gain general knowledge of a subject presented in a text, *skimming* would suit this purpose. By using skimming “the reader goes through a text quickly, not noting every word but trying to get the main idea of what the text is about” (Nation 70).
Reading for information seems closely connected to either scanning or search reading. “Scanning involves searching for a particular piece of information in a text, such as looking for a particular name or a particular number” (Nation 70), while during search reading, the reader tries to locate information on predetermined topics (Urquhart & Weir 103). These different types of reading might not exhaust the various possible reading activities in the ESL/EFL classroom. However, Day and Bamford state, in their book on extensive reading in ESL classrooms, that in language-teaching terms “extensive reading is recognized as one of four styles or ways of reading, the other three being skimming, scanning and intensive reading” (6). Thus the types of reading dealt with in this chapter seem to be the most commonly discussed in the research literature.

As for the goals that the students should have achieved at the end of year 9, teachers should, according to Nation, mainly rely on the intensive study of texts when the purpose is to work with improving the use of *aids* and developing the *reading strategies* of their students (25). When it comes to the purpose of increasing *reading comprehension*, and when defining what such comprehension should include, it is the text types promoted in this part of the syllabus that specifies what such reading comprehension attained at the end of year 9 should encompass.

### 2.4 Text types and genres

While genres are usually defined by external text features such as “their function and placement and the way in which they are perceived,” text types are defined by their internal features such as “their structure and linguistic features” (Lundahl 228-229. My translation). The goals that the students should have attained at the end of year 9 do not mention any specific genres such as novels, short stories, plays or poems, but is solely concerned with different text types. These should be “narrative, descriptive and argumentative texts”. “Simple literature” does not refer to the level of difficulty of the texts. The Swedish version of the syllabus talks about “enklare skönlitterära texter”, which is best translated as “simple texts of fiction”. Thus one of the aims of the
syllabus is also to emphasize the importance of fiction in connection to reading comprehension.

### 2.5 Assessing reading

When assessing reading comprehension through tests there are a number of factors that should be taken into consideration. Among these are text topic, text length, whether to use summary writing or to state specific questions about the text, language of the questions being asked, whether the questions should be implicit or explicit and what role vocabulary should be assigned (Alderson 113-114). There is also the choice of whether the aim is to assess *global understanding*, which is about gaining an overall comprehension of the text, or *local* understanding that focuses on details in the text and the comprehension of specific words, phrases and sentences (Lundahl 189).

Suggestions in the literature of what to keep in mind and how to assess reading strategies are not found to the same extent as suggestions on how to assess reading comprehension. “Language testing has traditionally been more concerned with establishing the products of comprehension than with examining the processes” (Alderson 303). However, Alderson talks of informal ways of assessment that are steered more towards assessing procedural aspects of reading. He specifically mentions qualitative methods such as self-assessment, immediate recall and interviews with readers about their test performance. These methods could be used in order to gain a better understanding of how the reader has understood a reading task, why he responded in a certain way, and if he feels that his performance reflect his understanding of the text (355-356). In short, the different reading strategies that were active during a reading task.

Ultimately, it can be noted that *reading purposes* are connected to the *goals to aim for* that serve as guidelines for the content of the teaching, while *text types* are connected to what *reading comprehension* should include according to the syllabus. As for *reading*
strategies, little is said other than that students should be able to use strategies when reading, and be able to adjust these to different kinds of texts. Just like the vagueness surrounding the term strategies, the guidelines regarding the assessment of students’ reading also seem fairly unclear. The guidelines in the criteria for the higher grades seem to give teachers little help when assessing the development of students, and the more able students’ aiming for these grades.

The aim of this chapter has been to show that the general guidelines in the syllabus leave much to ask for as far as reading comprehension and reading strategies are concerned. Additional theory is needed when examining what features teachers assign these terms.
3. Method and methodology

3.1 Methodology

Methodology is a broader term that refers to the theoretical logic of a research project, while methods are the various techniques used for the collection of data. Although it is important not to use these terms synonymously, the research methods used must be consistent with the logic embodied in the methodology in order to produce good research (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen 35).

3.1.1 A qualitative inductive approach

The methodological approach of this dissertation is of a qualitative and inductive nature. Main objectives in qualitative research include exploring and discovering rather than explaining and predicting, as are the most common aims of quantitative research (Johnson & Christensen 38). The inductive element in qualitative research has to do with how most researchers within the qualitative approach tend to analyze their data from the bottom up rather than from the top down when trying to create a more holistic view and a deeper understanding of the study object(s) (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen 6). The top down perspective is a main feature of quantitative methodology. Such a perspective is more concerned with explaining and predicting tendencies. This is often done through the study of variables in data analyses of quantitative research methods, such as questionnaires and surveys, and from that data trying to identify statistical relationships and unveil evidence or to prove or disprove hypotheses (Johnson & Christensen 38). Through inductive reasoning, on the other hand, the researcher begins with specific pieces of data, and tries to search for meaning in these data in order to be able to make more general statements about the phenomenon under investigation (Hatch 161).

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate teachers’ perceptions of the goals in the syllabus for English and how they work towards these, and from the findings hopefully
be able to make some general statements about the status and role of the syllabus at a particular school. An inductive analysis is best suited for this purpose, since through such reasoning the researcher looks for patterns between individual observations and tries to argue that these patterns might show general tendencies (Hatch 161).

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Qualitative semi-structured interviews

The method used for the collection of the main data in this dissertation is qualitative in-depth interviews, since there is “a logical connection” between the technique of “in-depth interviewing and inductive reasoning” (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen 35). The aim of this dissertation is an understanding of the teachers’ possible preferences and ideas about the goals in the syllabus for English, and how they work with and assess reading comprehension and reading strategies. Thus the qualitative interview is best suited since this technique aims at exploring “informants’ experiences and interpretations” (Hatch 91). According to Hatch interviews are used in much qualitative work alongside other data collection methods, “but they can be the primary or only data source in some qualitative projects” (91). In this dissertation the qualitative interview is the only data collection tool used.

The interviews took the shape of semi-structured interviews. This type of interview allows for a level of flexibility regarding how the interview is administered. An interview guide with specific questions is used, but these must not necessarily be asked in a specific order, since it is the flow rather than the order in the interview guide that decides when and how the questions are asked (Bailey 100).

One last dimension of the interviews should be addressed; the distinction between conducting explorative interviews and of proving hypotheses (Kvale 119). The questions in the interviews do not form parts of an entirely explorative interview. Neither is the main goal of the questions to set out to verify or falsify a clear and structured set of
hypotheses. The aim of the interviews is to investigate how the teachers interpret and work towards the goals in the syllabus for English, with the notion that these goals might be somewhat vague. The questions are constructed so that the answers will firstly explore the perceptions of the teachers, and how they work with reading comprehension and reading strategies in their classrooms. Secondly, the answers may either prove to be in line with the preconceived notion that the goals connected to reading in the syllabus are fairly inadequate, or not. Thus these interviews seem to place themselves somewhere in-between an explorative position, and the hypothesis-driven position that the goals in the syllabus are vague and seem to be of little support to the teachers.

As for the techniques and aids used during the interview sessions, the interviews were taped with a computerized audio program and later transcribed. Full transcripts are not included in this paper, but excerpts from these are presented in the results. The interviews were carried out in Swedish and the excerpts presented in this paper were translated into English. The first two interviews took 35 minutes each, while the third interview was finished in approximately 45 minutes. The interview questions can be found in appendix 1.

3.3 Ethical considerations

The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) states the ethical issues that need to be addressed during research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Svedner & Johansson 29-30). These guidelines were taken into account when preparing for and when conducting the interviews. The interviewees were informed about the purpose of this degree project and the interviews, that the interviews were going to be transcribed, and that excerpts of these were to be included in the dissertation. The interviewees were also told that the material collected through the interviews was going to be treated anonymously, and that the dissertation would include an anonymous profile of each of the persons interviewed.
4. Results

This chapter presents the results gained from the interviews. The use of *semi-structured interviews* allowed for a less rigid administration of the questions stated in the interview guide. Therefore, the questions are not dealt with one at a time. Instead, the results from the interviews, and the excerpts from them presented in this section, are divided into different thematic parts representing the different areas of enquiry dealt with in the questions.

4.1 Interviewees

The three interviewees are teachers of English at a school in southern Sweden. In order for the interviews to be anonymous the interviewees are given aliases.

Eva has 24 years experience as a teacher. She has been teaching English for the last four years. The classes she has taught during her teaching career and up until now are classes 7 to 9. Her other subject is craft.

Karin has been working as a teacher of English and Swedish for six years, in classes 7 to 9.

Anna is a teacher of English and Swedish, and has five and a half year’s experience as a teacher. She has a degree allowing her to teach grades 4 to 9. However, she has only taught classes 7 to 9.
4.2 Results from the interviews

4.2.1 Role and status of the syllabus

*Goals that the students should have attained at the end of year 9*

Eva and Anna agree that the first goal addressing reading comprehension gives a fairly clear idea of what kind of comprehension that the students should have achieved when graduating from secondary school. The mentioning of specific text types and the importance of fiction is a good reference point for them when choosing reading material. Anna emphasizes that although the reading comprehension addressed in this goal might be fairly easy for a student in year 9, it is important that the teacher is able to “break this goal down into several parts” so that “the teacher is able to see the progression of the students from the earlier ages up to the end of year 9”.

All three teachers view the second goal that addresses the use of *aids* in the reading process as very clear. Karin does however reflect over the use of the term *language activities* as being a bit too general, since it should include “everything relating to the language”. The fact that there are no guidelines for how to work with different types of aids is something that Karin also reflects on.

*Focus of the assessment and evaluation*

The status and role of this part of the syllabus seem less obvious to the interviewees. Eva feels that these guidelines “do not really give that much help at all”. Anna is of the opinion that what is said in the *the focus of the assessment and evaluation* is pretty much the same that is written in *the goals to attain*, with the one and only difference being that “more words are used this time”. All three interviewees agree that the text types mentioned in these goals are the same ones as in the goals to attain. They also believe that the different levels of difficulty that students should be able to achieve is a guideline that is not easy to attain for all students. Nor should this guideline perhaps be a requirement in order to receive a pass. Karin argues that since far from everyone of the students plan to study at university level after upper secondary school, it might be best to focus on more easily accessible types of texts, such as easier forms of fiction, for students that only aim at a pass.
As for various levels of difficulty, Anna and Eva distinguishes between the different reading practices in their classrooms. Both state how they promote easier kinds of fiction during what they refer to as “free reading”, while also trying to push the more able and independent readers with fiction that is somewhat above their ability. When it comes to the students’ abilities to adjust their reading according to text type and purpose, Anna says that her students are well adjusted to the thought that the different reading activities in her classroom have different purposes. The students are capable of adjusting their reading behavior with regards to whether they read something in the textbook, or if the students are engaged in free reading. In the first case they “are aware that they should engage in close reading”, while during the latter they should “read something that they themselves have chosen”. Eva also mentions the difficulties of being able to judge the students’ use of strategies, and what is actually meant by the word strategy in this part of the syllabus. “If by strategies is meant consulting a dictionary, that is easily observed. But I can’t really think of any other strategies right now that is as easily observable”.

With regards to the criteria for the higher grades, the interviewees seem to view these somewhat differently. Karin and Eva agree that these criteria are very vague, and they both state that to comment a text does not really say anything at all whether someone has understood the text or not. Eva states that “Does saying whether a text was good or bad suffice in that case? Obviously, it has to be the way in which the student comments on a text that has to be important for the grade, and that is up to me to decide”. Regarding being able to comment on a text, Karin, in line with Eva, says that it is a matter of how, and to what extent the students comment on a text. Karin also questions whether the length of the texts is an important criterion, and says that “content must be most important”. Anna admits that these criteria are very vague. To her, commenting on a text is done when the students talk about the book with her. Anna chooses to relate the ability to draw conclusions to the level of difficulty of reading material. “it is then about the message, but in reality they (the students) are able to draw conclusions form a very simple book, but in that case they have not attained an MVG. It depends upon the level of difficulty of the book”.

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4.2.2 Interpretation of main concepts

Assimilation and comprehension

The word assimilate is interpreted somewhat differently by the interviewees. Eva interprets it as “general reading comprehension” and “to be able to understand general ideas in the text.” Thus “one does not have to be able to draw any deep conclusions”.

Karin, on the other hand, questions the use of the word assimilate and says that if it was equivalent to the word comprehension, “then comprehension should be used instead”. According to Karin comprehension is about “being able to use the information gained from the text, and to be able to ask a clear question about the text, showing that one has understood the text”.

According to Anna “assimilate is to understand”. Similar to Karin, Anna perceives assimilate as that the students should be able to answer questions about the text. In this case, she distinguishes between two steps of gaining comprehension. The first step is that the students are able to answer factual questions about the text, such as “what was the person wearing when he..?”. The next step is about “conveying the message from the text, but that is one step further. But what they (the students) should at least be able to assimilate is the factual knowledge”. Anna also talks about the different text types demanding different types of comprehension from the reader. Narratives, instructions or descriptions are read in different ways. But fundamental to all types of comprehension is “a vocabulary that is at a certain level, otherwise you do not understand the content”.

Aids and Strategies

All interviewees view aids as equivalent to the use of language tools such as dictionaries and the Internet. The teacher acting as an aid is also mentioned by all three teachers. Anna also mentions the use of audiobooks or audio CDs, and that she, along with the librarian tries to accommodate students with special needs as much as they can by encouraging the use of such materials. Computers are used as aid by students with dyslexia, but that is more closely connected to the writing development of those students according to Anna.
All interviewees are of the opinion that the use of aids such as dictionaries or the Internet is a conscious strategy used in order to facilitate the reading process. Eva also talks about the different ways of reading a text. She mentions the use of *skimming* and *search reading* as conscious strategies that can be used by the students in order to tackle texts differently. Such ways of approaching texts are to some extent dealt with in year 9 in her classes.

Anna says that specific *reading strategies* are harder to pinpoint than for example the strategies used by students when developing their speaking skills. For Anna, a strategy that comes to mind when reading is when the students “try to understand a word with the help of the context in which it is placed”, a strategy that can be viewed as “a kind of exclusion method”. Anna also distinguishes between conscious and unconscious strategies. The use of dictionaries is a conscious strategy.

Karin perceives strategies as “the different ways that the individual takes, that a person feels that he needs to take in order to assimilate a content, or move forward from where he is”. She continues to say that in order to be able to use such strategies you have to be aware of your own abilities and your personal responsibility in the learning process. Self-knowledge and self-assessment is important when planning what strategies to use. The learner must ask himself “What do I need in order to be able to develop my skills?”

### 4.2.3 Working with main concepts

**Assimilation and comprehension**

Anna distinguishes between two main ways of working with students’ reading comprehension of texts. One of these is by using shorter texts, where the texts are translated into Swedish and where she carefully goes through “exactly what everything means. It is about word knowledge, what it means”. This activity is referred to by her as “close reading” or “deep reading”. The other way to enhance comprehension is through “free reading” of fiction. During free reading the students read stories from which they do not have to extract and comprehend every word, but where the purpose is “that they shall learn to understand the message, or the story, from the context”. The goal of the first method is to actively enhance the vocabulary of the students. The second method
hopefully also helps students to understand and assimilate certain unknown words implicitly by how an interest in the subject of the text leads to that the students understand the use of specific words easier. If students do not understand certain words during free reading there might also be a greater chance that they look it up, since the text in this case is chosen by the students themselves in order to suit their own interests. Apart from working with the improvement of reading comprehension in English, free reading also aims at developing fluent and independent readers. While working with free reading Anna stresses that she has to stay updated with new youth literature, since “it is important for me as a language teacher that I will be able to talk with the students about the texts that they have read, because that is a part of their development, their language development”.

Karin also emphasizes the importance of helping the students develop an adequate vocabulary. “Vocabulary comes first, the grammar is secondary, as long as it does not interfere with the comprehension”. Enhanced vocabulary is done through translation exercises and “close reading” of texts. Karin and Anna also use “search reading”, where students “look for details” in shorter texts, in order to improve their vocabulary.

Eva mentions the importance of using different text types. By using narratives, instructions and descriptions, different aspects of comprehension might be addressed. She seldom uses direct translation of texts, except when the students are to understand various idioms that are not easily explained in English. Questions about the content of a text are most often used when working with comprehension. Another common and more inclusive method is to ask the students to come up with questions about the text. Eva also stresses the importance of working with visual representations from the text when dealing with reading comprehension. She often does this before the class starts working with a text. “Before we start reading we often look at the pictures in the text, and try to guess what the text will be about. Especially weaker student seem to benefit from this”.

**Aids and Strategies**

According to all interviewees aids in the reading process mainly concern the use of dictionaries, but also sources on the Internet. According to Eva, the emphasis should be
on dictionaries when it comes to aiding inadequate vocabulary of the students, since
“you don’t always get the best translations of words and idioms from Internet sources”. Thus the use of dictionaries during reading activities is encouraged continuously, and according to Eva the aim is to get all students to learn how to use a dictionary in year 7. Karin encourages her students to first use a dictionary, the Internet or peers when trying to make sense of something they have not understood while reading, and only use the assistance of the her as the last resort.

The different ways in which the word strategy is interpreted by the interviewees also reflect their different ways of working with reading strategies. Eva mentions how she presents to the students in year 9 different ways of reading a text, such as skimming and search reading. Such “different ways of reading” are not often promoted by Karin. When it comes to reading strategies Karin emphasizes the importance of encouraging students to dare to ask for help and advice in English, since most students usually ask her questions in Swedish during lessons. Such “social strategies” can be useful in English-speaking contexts when aiding comprehension.

In line with Karin, different ways of reading do not seem connected to what Anna refers to as strategies. When she uses “search reading” in her classes it is connected to the work with increasing the reading comprehension of the students. As for strategies, Anna says that in her classes she talks to her students about the strategy of being able to make sense of a word or phrase that is being read by guessing from the context in which it appears. Another strategy according to Anna is how she tries to push the students when there is something that they have not understood, and try to prevent them from giving up their reading due to difficulties of comprehension. Many students tend to give up if there are occasional words that they do not understand. In that case it is important to encourage the students to read on and not get stuck on certain words if they are still able to understand the main ideas in a text. But it is important that she as a teacher does not give them a text that is too advanced. “In that case the effect is the opposite. The students read on and on and still don’t understand anything”.

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4.2.5 Assessment of reading

Assimilation and comprehension

Karin assesses the reading comprehension of her students most often through book report writing. “That way it is easier for them to reflect, less pressure, and peace and quiet”. When assessing reading comprehension, and especially with regards to the more able students aiming at a higher grade, it is “the cognitive that in some way has to be evaluated or assessed. How far has the student progressed cognitively to be able to comment on a text and to be able to draw conclusions, and what is it that the student actually says? What is being commented on? How is it being commented on?”.

Eva says that apart from “being able to retell the story, both in written form and orally” the students “should be able to reflect on what they have read”, by answering and constructing questions about the text. At least when aiming for a higher grade, such skills are necessary. In the case of assimilating texts, and attaining a pass, the students only have to “get the general ideas of the text”.

When assessing “free reading” of books that all students have read, Anna often does this by talking about and discussing the book in class. She emphasizes that it is important that she must have read the book in order to be able to assess whether the interpretation by the students is in any way acceptable. Anna continues to say that “of course the students can interpret a story differently, but they need to be able to tell what the book is about”. Individual assessment of the free reading of books chosen by the students themselves is often done in written form. When Anna and Karin assess “deep reading” the questions are more steered towards examining whether the students have understood facts in the texts or if they have assimilated specific language features. This kind of assessment is often done in writing.

Aids and strategies

Knowing how to look words up in a dictionary and to be able to use Internet sources in the reading process is fairly easy to assess according to Eva and Karin. These kinds of aids are the most commonly used in their classrooms, and the assessment of the use of such reading aids is simply done by trying to judge how much assistance from the
teacher, or peers, that the students need when using these aids. The more independent the students are in their use of aids, the more developed these skills are.

Assessing the use of other strategies is not as easily done according to Karin. She says that “I think I would put it like this, that as long as all goes well, I take it that they (the students) have strategies to make it”. As soon as there are a lot of grammatical errors, spelling errors or a weak vocabulary “you have to have a discussion (with the student), either they use a strategy where they go back and repeat what they need to repeat, or if you (the teacher) go and get a dictionary”.

Eva says that the use of strategies “is probably not really dealt with in the assessment and evaluation of the language development to the same extent as say, comprehension”. She thinks that this is a weakness, but says that the use of aids and strategies in connection to reading is harder to assess than comprehension. Eva regards strategies, apart from the students use of different kinds of aids, mainly as different types of reading such as skimming and search reading. These are dealt with in the textbook, and when Eva talks about different types of reading in her classes in year 9 she includes some exercises on these “strategies”. However, Eva is inclined to say that these exercises, or the assessment of such techniques, are not one of the most important factors taken into consideration when assessing the students’ language development.

When Anna assesses the use of reading strategies much focus is on to what extent the student has developed an independent reading behavior. How much do they need her help in the reading process? “When the student starts to be able to make it on his own I judge that the development of strategies has moved forward”. Asking the teacher for help is not a sustainable strategy to her, since the students will not always have a teacher around to help them. Instead Anna strongly encourages them to use different forms of aid on their own, such as dictionaries and the Internet, and “the less she has to nag (about the importance of using these aids), the more developed their strategies are, the more independent they are in their learning”.

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5. Analysis and discussion

In this chapter the teachers’ perceptions of the goals stated in the syllabus, and how the teachers choose to work towards and assess these goals, are analyzed and discussed in connection to the main areas of inquiry presented at the beginning of this dissertation. These main areas are reading comprehension and reading strategies.

5.1 Aspects of reading comprehension

Of the two goals addressing the reading skills that students should have attained at the end of year 9, the first one addressing reading comprehension seems to be regarded as superordinate among the teachers interviewed in this paper. There seems to be several reasons for this. The teachers stress the difficulties of working towards improving reading strategies of their students and how hard it is to assess such skills. They also feel that aspects of comprehension are addressed to a larger extent in the syllabus for English than those of strategies. Thus the more concretized concept of comprehension might naturally be prioritized when teaching reading in the EFL classroom. But first and foremost, comprehension simply seems to be what reading is mainly about.

The definition of reading used in this paper seems to highlight the procedural aspects of reading by how it explains reading as “dealing with language messages in written or printed form” (Urquhart & Weir 14). However, such a definition also implies that the goal of any reading process should result in a reading product: the comprehension of text messages. Thus from a cognitive and psycholinguistic view of reading, the higher status of reading comprehension in the syllabus than that of reading strategies, and the way in which the teachers interviewed in this paper focus on reading comprehension in their classes, seem natural. If comprehension is the end goal of reading, it might also be considered by teachers as the most important factor to consider when teaching reading. Thus strategies that could enhance comprehension could easily be neglected.
The concept of comprehension among the teachers is perceived primarily as an individual cognitive ability. Moreover, all teachers seemed to exclude sociolinguistic factors, such as interaction and communication between different readers (Bloom & Green 397), from the main aspects of reading. In line with how Urquhart and Weir explain comprehension as the end result of a particular reading task (88), the teachers viewed reading comprehension as the information, ideas and facts that the students should have gained after having read pieces of texts. Thus their idea of reading comprehension also seems in line with how Frank Smith explains it as “a state rather than a set of skills or processes” (13). However, the main focuses of reading comprehension, and the demands of the students with regards to the comprehension of texts, seem to differ somewhat between the interviewees.

Comprehension to Eva is mainly about understanding general ideas, while Karin stresses students’ ability to use the information gained from the text and to be able to answer and state clear questions about the text. Anna distinguishes between being able to answer simple detailed questions about features of a text, and conveying the message from a text. The first of these two abilities should suffice in order to attain the goal for reading comprehension according to Anna. Thus the difference between some of the teachers regarding how to approach the goal to attain that addresses reading comprehension, seems to be whether global understanding that highlights general ideas of a narrative, or local understanding that addresses detailed features in a text (Lundahl 189), should be the initial focus for reading comprehension.

Both Anna and Karin stress how the most fundamental factor for reading comprehension is an adequate vocabulary. When working towards increasing the reading comprehension of their students, the focus is first and foremost placed on word knowledge, and on actively enhancing the vocabulary of the students. This is mostly done through the careful study of texts referred to as “deep reading”, which seems equivalent to intensive reading, when students work with shorter texts with close guidance from the teacher (Richards & Jacobs 296). Anna also promotes comprehension through vocabulary exercises with the use of short stories and the method of search reading, where students are to look for specific details or words in a text (Urquhart &
Weir 103). This focus on vocabulary in connection to reading comprehension is in line with how a “high-frequency vocabulary” is a main feature of the overall reading comprehension of a basic user of English in the *Common European Framework* (Council of Europe, *CEF* 69), but which is not included in the goals for reading in the syllabus for English. Since both Anna and Karin perceive vocabulary as the basis on which reading comprehension should be built when working towards the goals to attain, this seems an important factor to include when addressing reading comprehension, but which is left out in the syllabus.

Anna also believes that “free reading” in her classes might lead to the assimilation of new words. During free reading students choose their own material. According to Anna, chances are therefore greater that the students look up words in a dictionary or try harder to guess from context when something is not understood. However, free reading is steered more towards Anna’s second goal addressing reading comprehension, which is about “conveying the message of a text”. Free reading seems equivalent to *extensive reading* by how it lets students choose books that reflect their own interests, and that are well within their reading abilities (Day & Bamford 8, 13). Also by how Anna uses free reading to promote fluent and independent readers it can be likened to extensive reading practice (16).

Independence in reading is also the main feature of the overall reading comprehension of an *independent user* of English in the *Common European Framework* (69). This ability is not mentioned in the syllabus for English in connection to reading. The syllabus simply states that students at the end of year 9 should “be able, on their own and together with others, to plan and carry out work tasks”. This goal highlights that students should be able to work on their own, but it does not explicitly promote the development of independent readers. Both Anna and Eva state in their interviews that many of their students are active readers of literature in English, who have attained a great degree of independence already. Both teachers try to be as active as possible when pushing these students to read literature that is somewhat above their ability in order to increase their reading comprehension. Thus, according to Anna and Eva, independence in reading is a natural part of many students’ reading behavior, that should be taken into
account when assessing the reading comprehension of these more able students. Such skills are however not mentioned in the criteria for the higher grades in connection to reading comprehension.

Students’ local understanding of texts gained through intensive reading by Karin and Anna, is mainly assessed through writing. As for assessing the increase in reading comprehension, it is students’ cognitive development that has to be assessed according to Karin. This is especially important if the student aims at a higher grade. In connection to the focus and the assessment of the evaluation, and what it is that the students should be able to “comment” on and “draw conclusions” from, it is about what is being commented on and how it is being commented on. Karin feels that reading comprehension in general is easier to assess if the students are allowed to write about the texts they have read. These writing tasks are not what Alderson would refer to as summary writing tasks, during which students are given a limited amount of time to write (236). Most often they are book reports written as assignments and homework. Karin believes that such tasks, when the students are allowed to write on their own, put less pressure on the students. These methods also make it easier for the teacher to see the development between the different occasions of assessing. Thus the progression of the students’ reading comprehension is also more easily assessed according to Karin.

Since Eva considers reading comprehension to be primarily about a global understanding of texts, a closer study of texts through the work of vocabulary exercises does not primarily seem to be connected to the promotion of reading comprehension. This does not necessarily mean that Eva neglects the connection between a sufficient vocabulary and general reading comprehension. But practicing vocabulary among her students might be more closely connected to exercises relating to other language skills such as writing or speaking. Eva’s assessment of reading comprehension with regards to the goals to attain, leans more towards testing the students’ ability to retell a story, both orally and in writing. In order to attain this goal no deeper reflections are necessary. Like Karin, Eva admits that the criteria for the higher grades are vague by how they only state that the students have to be able to “comment” and “draw conclusions”, and thus these guidelines give very little support in the assessment of the more able students.
Eva says that the students simply have to prove that they are able to reflect on what they have read, and that it is up to her to decide from case to case whether the student has succeeded to come up with adequate reflections.

The recommendations in *The Common European Framework* concerning what aspects that should be in focus in connection to reading comprehension, differ to some extent from the goals stated in the syllabus for English. More importantly, the views of the teachers interviewed in this paper about what reading comprehension mainly should encompass seem to be more in line with the CEF than with the syllabus. The importance of a “high-frequency vocabulary” and “independent readers” are factors mentioned in the CEF in connection to reading comprehension that the teachers also emphasize. The general opinion of the three teachers regarding the goals stated in the syllabus, in connection to reading comprehension, seems to be that the *goals to attain* are fairly straightforward, while the guidelines and criteria stated in *the focus of the assessment and evaluation* are of little help. When working with increasing the reading comprehension of the students, and assessing such skills, the criteria for the higher grades are regarded as especially vague. While the teachers seem to find some support in the goals to attain regarding what text types to include in reading comprehension activities, they feel that they get less help from the syllabus concerning how to assess the more advanced stages of reading comprehension. As for the potential negative impact that such vague criteria in the current syllabus might have had on teachers’ work on reading comprehension, and the decline in reading comprehension during the years in-between 1992 and 2003, is obviously impossible to say. However, the results of this degree project show that these teachers find very little support from some of the general guidelines stated in the syllabus.

5.2 Aspects of reading strategies

Reading strategies as a goal to attain, and a skill to be premiered, comes secondary to the role of attaining reading comprehension in the syllabus. The term strategy is not
defined in the syllabus but is merely mentioned as an ability that the students should be able to use during the process of reading, in order to adjust the reading after the type of text and the purpose of a text. In line with how the research literature assign reading strategies various applications and meanings (Alderson 310), the teachers interviewed in this paper also have different takes on what reading strategies should or might encompass.

In this paper, *aids* are regarded as specific techniques used in the reading process to enhance and improve reading, while *strategy* refers to all techniques, conscious or unconscious, that the reader employs for the same purposes. As for how aids should be understood according to the teachers, they all agreed that dictionaries and the Internet are concrete aids in the reading process. The categorization of strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) places such forms of resources that help manipulating and controlling the language in the category of *cognitive strategies* (81). The other form of aid mentioned by the teachers was the teacher acting as a resource. Such aid is connected to *social strategies* that aims at incorporating other people in the reading process (169).

Strategies to Eva mainly concern different types of reading such as *skimming, scanning* and *search reading*. She also, in line with the others, viewed the use of dictionaries and the Internet as forms of *conscious strategies*. The way in which Eva interpreted the concept of strategies is not that strange, considering how there is a confusion in the literature about what strategies should refer to, and that greater clarity seems necessary in order to tell strategies apart from skills and other abilities (Alderson 311). However, since this paper perceives strategies as reader oriented techniques (Urquhart & Weir 96-99), that deal with problem solving, reading enhancement and reading awareness (Lundahl 208), Karin’s definition is more in accordance with the use of the concept in this paper. She explained strategies as the ways that the individual reader uses in order to assimilate a text or to be able to move forwards in the reading process. Karin also mentioned the importance that the reader needs to be aware of his abilities when planning what strategies to use. She talks about self-assessment and self-knowledge when knowing what is needed for the development of reading skills. Planning and self assessment clearly form *metacognitive strategies* that help coordinating the reading
process (Oxford 138). Metacognitive awareness in fact is also stressed in the syllabus, but not in connection to any specific skills. According to the goals for year 9 students should “be able to reflect over and draw conclusions about their way of learning English.”

Karin failed to mention how to promote such metacognitive strategies. Instead she talked about the need to develop social strategies, by encouraging the students to dare to ask for help and advice in English. Anna mentioned that she tries to teach her students how to guess what an unknown word in a text might mean by guessing from the context in which the word is placed. This can be viewed as a form of compensation strategy through which the reader makes up for inadequate vocabulary by trying to guess the meaning of words by drawing on the “knowledge of the topic under discussion” (Oxford 93). Anna also tries to enhance the self-confidence of the students in their reading, by encouraging them not to give up too early in a text if they do not immediately understand what is being read. Such encouragement acts as a kind of promotion of the affective skills of the students such as “conscious decisions to take reasonable risks” (166).

The way in which students use different kinds of aids such as dictionaries and the Internet is assessed by judging how much assistance the student needs from the teacher or peers. Other than that there seem to be no formal ways of assessing the use of strategies according to Karin. She simply states that “as long as all goes well I take it that they (the students) have strategies to make it”. If there are many grammatical errors and inconsistencies in the language of a student, she urges the student to go back and repeat what has to be repeated. This kind of repetition is the most basic of the cognitive strategies (Oxford 70). Anna perceives the assessment of reading strategies in a similar way. When the students have started to make it on their own when reading she sees that as a proof of the improvement of their reading strategies. Anna once again emphasizes that students have to develop as independent readers. The more independent the reader is, the more developed his reading strategies are.
The second reading goal for year 9 should be easy to attain if the focus is only on assessing the kinds of technical aids, such as dictionaries, that students use when reading. But difficulties clearly arise if one widens the scope and also includes the use of strategies. The teachers dwell on a number of different reading strategies that could be topics for discussion with the students. However, the ways in which to work towards improving such strategies seem to be difficult, and as far as reading is concerned, the focus on reading comprehension seems to leave little time for discussions about reading strategies with the students.

Another real crux of the matter is how to assess the use of strategies. Alderson points out that with regards to assessing reading the main focus has always been on comprehension, while the assessment of procedural aspects of reading is still widely neglected (303). His suggestions on how the use of strategies and ways of interacting with texts may be assessed, are fairly ambitious. These include individual qualitative interviews with learners from which insights about the choices made during the reading and issues on self-assessment might be assessed (Ibid.). Such forms of assessment require vast resources in the form of hours allocated for the purpose of these interviews. The chance of being able to assess the use of reading strategies through such methods in whole classes seems virtually impossible, and one question that arises is whether such kinds of assessment would only take to much time and effort from the reading itself. The only hint given by the teachers partaking in this study about how to assess the development of reading strategies, is by trying to assess how independent readers the students have become. The more independent they are when reading, the more advanced their reading strategies has become. Such a general form of assessment clearly lacks the ability to assess many of the strategies and specific techniques at use in the reading process of the student. However, the strong focus on promoting independent readers by the teachers, and which is also a main goal in The Common European Framework, once more proves to be a goal to attain, or a main feature of the assessment in connection to reading, that maybe should be explicitly emphasized in the syllabus for English.
6. Conclusion

This degree project set out to investigate how three teachers of English at a secondary school in the south of Sweden interpreted the goals on reading for year 9, and how they worked towards having their students achieve these goals. The focus was on how these goals emphasize reading comprehension and reading strategies. The perceptions among some of the teachers turned out to be very different with regards to what reading comprehension and reading strategies should encompass, and how to best work towards an enhancement of these abilities.

As for the goal addressing reading comprehension for year 9, the main difference between some of the teachers seemed to be whether the initial focus should be on a local or a global understanding of texts. The way in which the teachers worked towards and assessed the detailed comprehension that signifies local understanding was through the closer study of texts. Global understanding was assessed by students retelling the main ideas from the texts that they had read.

The concept of strategy was also perceived differently by the teachers. Types of reading such as skimming and search reading, but also abilities such as metacognitive awareness, social strategies and other techniques used in order to facilitate the reading process, were regarded as different forms of strategies. The teachers agreed that the role of reading strategies is secondary to that of reading comprehension, and that working towards improving the reading strategies of their students and assessing these is difficult. They also agreed that the reading goals, although interpreted differently, served as concrete guidelines, while the criteria for the higher grades were regarded as very vague and thus of little help in the assessment of more able students’ reading skills.

As for the potential influence that these grading criteria, and the reading goals for year 9, might have had on teachers’ work on reading comprehension and ultimately on the weak results in reading comprehension in NU03, are not considered in the survey (Skolverket, NU03 89). However, the results of this degree project showed how reading
goals that are open to interpretation, along with vague grading criteria, lead to great
differences in how to address both reading comprehension and reading strategies in
EFL classrooms at this particular school. Such potential flaws in the current syllabus for
English should therefore be taken into account when constructing the syllabus that will
include guidelines connected to the new grading system, coming into effect in 2011 or
2012.
Works cited


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Appendix 1

Interview guide

Profil

1. Under hur många år har du arbetat som lärare?
2. Vilka ämnen förutom engelska undervisar du i eller har du undervisat i?
3. Vilka åldrar har du undervisat mest i?
4. Vilka åldrar/klasser undervisar du i nu?

Frågor

1. Vilken vägledning anser du att målen för läsning för årskurs 9 ger?
2. Hur tolkar du ‘tillgodogöra sig’?
3. Hur arbetar du vanligtvis för att främja elevernas ‘tillgodogörande’ av texter?
4. Hur tolkar du ‘strategier’?
5. Hur arbetar du främst för att förbättra sådana ‘strategier’?
6. Vad har ni för slags ‘hjälpmedel’ i undervisningen?
7. Hur arbetar du främst för att förbättra elevernas användande av sådana ‘hjälpmedel’?
8. Hur väljer du texter till din undervisning?
9. Vilka sorters texter använder du dig mest av?
10. Vilka slags läsaktiviteter är vanligast i klassrummet?
11. Vilken vägledning anser du att bedömningens inriktning ger?
12. Vilken vägledning för utvärdering och bedömning ger betygskriterierna för de högre betygen?
13. Hur utvärderar och bedömer du bäst elevernas ‘tillgodogörande’ av texter?
14. Hur utvärderar och bedömer du bäst elevernas utveckling av ‘strategier’?
15. Hur utvärderar och bedömer du bäst elevernas användande av ”hjälpmedel”?