

Article

# Exploring Student Agency in Narratives of English Literacy Events across School Subjects

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**Abstract:** In contemporary academia, English-language reading assignments are prevalent, even in contexts where English is not the primary medium of instruction nor the local language. This presents a challenge for students with English as a foreign language (EFL) who seek to pursue a university education in their home country. This study investigates the presence of English literacy events in Swedish upper secondary schools outside of English classes and explores their implications for university readiness and educational equity. Using survey data from 163 EFL students and qualitative content analysis, students' written comments revealed a notable absence of English literacy events in non-English subjects, with limited exposure to written English texts and occasional use of multimodal English activities. The findings underscore disparities in students' opportunities to engage with academic English literacy practices, primarily influenced by individual factors. This paper delves into the interplay between individual dimensions, and institutional and social practices, in shaping student agency in English academic literacy practices.

**Keywords:** academic literacy; student agency; English as a foreign language; higher education; upper secondary education; literacy events; literacy practices; curriculum studies; English for academic purposes (EAP); English medium instruction (EMI); equity



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## 1. Introduction

The global academic phenomenon of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) lacks a shared definition. However, recently, EMI has been defined as the sole or partial use of English to teach and learn academic subjects other than English [1]. In non-English-speaking countries' higher education (HE) where the local language is used as the medium of instruction, much of the assigned reading is in English, making the language of instruction partially in English [2]. Related to such partial use of English in HE, the concept of 'parallel-language use' is used in the language policies at Nordic universities [3–5].

These English academic literacy practices (partial EMI) operate under the assumption that EFL students already possess or can quickly develop a sufficiently high level of English academic reading proficiency to handle their university academic tasks, given that most disciplinary research publications are written in English [6–8]. The focus of such academic reading in English is mainly on learning the content; the text functions primarily as a bearer of information, not a language learning resource. Given the demands for academic reading, "[c]ontent learning may be inhibited rather than enhanced by the extra workload with textbooks in a foreign language." ([9], p. 316).

The transition of EFL students to EMI university settings has garnered significant global attention, reflecting a spectrum of policy and language-related challenges (e.g., [10–12]), shifts in self-efficacy and motivational beliefs [13,14], and highlighting the critical role of teaching support (e.g., [15]). This showcases the complexities and implications of EFL students adapting to (sole or partial) English-medium academic environments. Previous studies have shown that EFL university students may experience difficulties with the English academic literacy practices they are required to engage in, specifically reading in English [9,16–22].

Although university admission requirements include a certain standard of English proficiency, the observed low level of academic English reading proficiency among pre-tertiary-level EFL students may limit their student agency in HE literacy (e.g., [23,24]). However, there is limited research on English literacy practices preceding HE, particularly in university preparatory programs in upper secondary education where the local language is the medium of instruction.

This study addresses this gap by delving into the experiences and attitudes of EFL upper secondary school students concerning the use of English texts for content learning in non-English subjects. By exploring students' narratives of English literacy events within the Swedish upper secondary education system, the research aims to illuminate their habits, attitudes, and feelings [25] towards reading English texts in diverse subjects. In doing so, this study seeks to provide insights into their familiarity with using English for content learning, akin to the English-dominated academic literacy practices prevalent in HE. Additionally, the analyses will shed light on the existing individual and institutional antecedents influencing student agency in English academic literacy practices [26].

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Geographical Context—Swedish Upper Secondary School and Swedish Higher Education

This study indirectly addresses a phenomenon that is prevalent in many non-Anglophone countries, namely that “the use of English as an academic lingua franca means that reading in [a second language] is a common requirement around the world for university students who are not native speakers of English, whether they are studying in an English-speaking country or in their own” ([2], p. 5). More directly, this study examines the landscape of Swedish pre-tertiary education to gain insights into students' familiarity with content learning facilitated through the medium of English text usage.

In Sweden, the upper secondary school system comprises six national programs—Business Management and Economics (ECO), Arts (ART), Humanities (HUM), Natural Science (NAT), Social Science (SOC), and Technology (TEC)—all governed by the national curriculum. The National Agency for Education (NAE) has defined and outlined two key goals in the national curriculum, namely: (i) the university preparation goal and (ii) the equality goal. The latter emphasizes that education should equitably cater to each student's “different conditions, needs, and levels of knowledge” to achieve educational goals, regardless of locality ([27], Ch. 1, my translation). The former pertains to schools' responsibility to offer opportunities for students to attain the requirements for a diploma offering eligibility to university by providing “all individual students . . . sufficient knowledge to be well prepared for studies in higher education” ([27], Ch. 2.1., my translation). Each program specifies diploma goals tailored to its focus areas, such as natural sciences and mathematics for NAT, and economics and law for ECO. Here, English is also highlighted as a language of communication relevant to various programs. For example, TEC's diploma goals state that students should acquire English proficiency in a technical context, enabling them to engage with technology and technological developments in English [28]. Thus, while Swedish is the primary language of instruction, English may be partially used for content learning, as it is in HE.

Within HE, both in Sweden and internationally, there is an increasing use of English. While Swedish is the most common medium of instruction at the undergraduate level, courses/programs incorporate a significant amount of assigned reading in English, thus partially using English to teach and learn content knowledge; in fact, as much as 50 to 80 percent of assigned reading is in English at the undergraduate level [7]. Given the university-preparatory goal in the national curriculum, this prevalence of English literacy practices in HE raises questions about whether upper secondary education adequately provides all its students with skills and abilities to cope with future English academic literacy practices.

## 2.2. Literacy

The concept of literacy expanded in meaning definitions and field applications during the 20th century. One of the most prominent meanings is that of a metaphor for competency, as exemplified in concepts like academic literacy [29], or reading literacy, assessed in major international reading assessments [30].

In academic discourse, the concepts of academic literacy and academic reading literacy are interconnected yet distinct. Li's extensive review of literacy research development emphasizes the multifaceted nature of academic literacy, highlighting language-based, disciplinary-based, and sociocultural approaches and values and the intricate interplay between these dimensions [31]. Academic literacy involves critical analysis, synthesis, and engagement with complex texts and disciplinary knowledge, emphasizing language use within academic settings and its role in content learning [32,33]. The perspective on academic literacy has evolved beyond a focus on discrete skills to encompass a broader social practice intertwined with disciplinary epistemology and identity [31]. This perspective marks the importance of students' active engagement in authentic disciplinary learning activities to develop advanced literacy skills [30]. While academic literacy comprises, for example, higher-order skills, critical thinking, and disciplinary engagement, these are also central aspects of reading literacy [34–36].

Reading literacy is defined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as "understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, develop one's knowledge and potential, and participate in society" ([30], p. 1). In this definition, reading involves several aspects, from entering a text and its written structure to gaining independent understanding and then becoming a member of a written cultural community. Academic reading, integral to HE [37], is characterized by reading within academic contexts to acquire and construct subject knowledge [36,38]. Academic reading stands apart from other forms of reading due to its complexity, purposefulness, and critical nature [39]. It is considered essential for success in HE, with connections to, for example, disciplinary engagement, critical thinking, and deep learning [40]. Research on academic reading has been overshadowed by research on academic writing, despite the indispensable relationship between them and their importance for academic life [41,42]. As part of larger academic social practices, academic reading becomes related to issues of equity and widening participation [41]. Challenges persist in effectively integrating academic reading into teaching, assessment, and academic development within university settings [43].

The intersection between academic literacy and academic reading underscores the need for holistic approaches to literacy development that can encompass all these aspects, involving both cognitive and autonomous elements, as well as social and ideological dimensions [44]. Therefore, within educational contexts, literacy becomes an essential concept, representing a societal asset that is not equally accessible to everyone.

Within New Literacy Studies, literacy is widely recognized as a social practice that emerges through text interactions occurring in diverse contexts, known as literacy events [25,45]. These literacy events cover a range of situations involving written text. However, the complexity of literacy events becomes evident when attempting to delineate their time boundaries or considering the diverse forms written contributions can take, influenced by the primary modality involved. In acknowledging the complexity of literacy events influenced by multimodality [46], it is essential to recognize that 'reading a text' can extend beyond conventional interpretations, such as the single action of reading a physical printed text, and, instead, include diverse forms such as scripted films with subtitles or even listening to spoken explanations from a teacher. For the purposes of this study, the term 'text' will be used in accordance with its conventional meaning, referring primarily to printed or online written text [47], particularly when exploring students' experiences and practices related to text usage.

From the analysis of literacy events, a larger construct known as literacy practice (or text practice) can emerge, incorporating recurring literacy events along with values,

attitudes, feelings, and social relationships [45]. Literacy is thus intertwined with the social fabric in which individuals interact, extending beyond specific events. By examining literacy practices, researchers illuminate normative roles played by dominant text practices within specific contexts and among participants, shedding light on the social text practice's implications for individuals' perceptions, emotions, and identities [48], embracing psychological, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions.

Given the social construction of academic literacy and how literacy practices not only impact individuals' experiences and emotions but also shape their abilities to navigate educational contexts, make choices, and develop their identities within academic settings, literacy is understood as a dynamic process that empowers learners to engage meaningfully with their academic environment. Consequently, literacy is closely linked to student agency [49].

### 2.3. Student Agency

As a theoretical analytical lens, the concept of student agency has gained prominence in the field of education, especially during the last decade [26,50]. Student agency serves as both an objective and a mechanism to empower learners in navigating unfamiliar educational contexts. It builds on previous literature on the notion of human agency where agency, from a social-cognitive standpoint, serves as a mediator between intentionality, self-reflection, and self-efficacy [51]. Recent longitudinal research [14] examining changes in self-efficacy and motivational beliefs among students in the transition to EMI settings highlights the significance of self-efficacy and motivation in adapting to new learning environments. Agency also comprises traits like persistence and decision-making, enabling individuals to handle (or not handle) obstacles and seize opportunities [51]. Persistence—closely related to self-efficacy and motivation—can be understood as the sustained effort and determination to overcome challenges and achieve goals [52,53]. Thus, persistence is essential for student agency attributes such as the ability to make informed choices and take ownership of one's learning journey.

The multidimensional nature and growing significance of student agency in educational research have led to various conceptualizations and definitions [26,49]. However, critics argue that student agency has been used as a colloquial term rather than a fully developed scholarly concept [54]. This criticism stems from the broad scope of the concept, which encompasses multiple related factors and subdimensions such as "self-efficacy, self-regulation, identity and power" ([55], p. 654). As a result, research studies tend to focus on specific subdimensions rather than addressing agency in its entirety [26].

In their validation and utilization of the existing instrument *The Agency of University Students Scale* (AUS) designed to measure student agency, Jääskelä and colleagues [55,56] identified three dimensions and ten subdimensions of agency within the AUS. The three overarching dimensions were categorized as (i) individual, (ii) relational, and (iii) contextual sources of agency. The connections to agency become apparent when considering the cognitive and social aspects of literacy, as mentioned earlier. Although the AUS captures various aspects of agency, Jääskelä and colleagues concluded that due to the "lack of analysis of the interplay between agency and learning contexts, such as courses and learning activities [...] we need more knowledge about the factors that facilitate or hinder student agency to develop agency-supportive practices." ([55], p. 654). This study heeds this call by exploring literacy events in upper secondary education as factors antecedent to student agency.

Vaughn et al. define antecedents as "(t)hose events or incidents that occur prior to the occurrence of student agency, what supports agency" ([49], p. 715). Therefore, investigating English literacy events across subjects for content learning may highlight their role as antecedents to student agency in the text practices within HE.

To frame HE students' agency, Stenalt and Lassesen [26] presented a conceptual model illustrating the interconnectedness between individual antecedents, student agency, and student outcomes. According to their model, students' prior backgrounds are intricately

linked to the development of their agency, which in turn influences their outcomes. The model delineates antecedents into two main categories: individual and institutional. Individual antecedents encompass factors such as self-efficacy, motivation, competence beliefs, and mastery experience. Institutional antecedents include teaching practices, instructional designs, and learning environments. These antecedents collectively contribute to the cultivation of student agency, thereby impacting student outcomes.

The two preceding sections underscore the relationship of literacy and agency, which encapsulate both individual cognitive processes and broader social and institutional dynamics. Antecedents operating at both individual and contextual levels play pivotal roles in shaping student agency. Consequently, literacy practices within pre-tertiary education assume critical importance, as they afford students opportunities to develop the agency necessary to navigate the literacy demands they encounter upon transitioning to HE. In the context of the increased use of assigned reading written in English in HE studies, students' English academic literacy becomes essential.

### 3. Purpose and Research Prompts

This study aims to investigate the integration of English literacy events within non-English subjects in upper secondary education in Sweden and its impact on the attitudes and readiness of EFL students for university studies. In doing so, it provides a critical perspective on the national curriculum goals of university preparation and equality. The investigation seeks to illuminate how students' experiences with English literacy events serve as antecedents for the development of student agency. Through an analysis of student narratives, this study endeavors to uncover their habits, attitudes, and feelings regarding reading English texts across various subjects. Specifically, it aims to offer insights into their familiarity with and ability to exert agency within educational practices, particularly those aligned with the English-dominated academic literacy practices prevalent in HE. This study is guided by the following research prompts:

- To what extent do students report the use of English texts in subjects other than English within university preparatory programs in the Swedish upper secondary education system?
- What are the attitudes and feelings of students towards reading in English for content learning, and how does this relate to their student agency development?
- How may English literacy practices in upper secondary education influence the preparedness of all students for university studies?

### 4. Materials and Methods

#### 4.1. Data Generation and Participants

Six upper secondary schools were invited to participate in this study. The selection of these schools aimed to ensure representation of all the national upper secondary school programs providing eligibility to HE (ART, ECO, etc.), of school location (big and small cities), and of ownership (municipal and independent). This approach was intended to provide a reasonable representation of upper secondary schools in the study.

This study utilized a larger survey dataset comprising written responses from 163 EFL students, including 95 females and 68 males, with an average age of 18 years. The data were collected by the author/researcher during a single class period in the students' final year of upper secondary education. Prior to providing their written informed consent, students had the opportunity to ask questions. The survey, administered as a paper-and-pencil questionnaire primarily with multiple-choice questions, also featured open-ended response fields accompanied by prompt questions towards the end. Comments varied in length, ranging from a couple of sentences to half a page, and the prompts aimed to capture students' attitudes and experiences concerning reading English texts for content learning in non-English subjects.

#### 4.2. Data Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was carried out on students' open comments, drawing from conventional content analysis which includes four main steps [57]:

- (i) Data collection and immersion:
  - The hand-written responses from the students were transcribed into a spreadsheet.
  - Initial readings were performed to become familiarized with the data.
- (ii) Coding:
  - Comments relevant to the research questions were identified and retained ("related"), while unrelated comments were disregarded from further analysis ("unrelated").
  - A preliminary coding of students' comments was conducted: Comments indicating rare or no encounters with English texts outside the English subject were coded as "0" to denote the absence of English literacy events. Comments reporting occasional or frequent exposure to English texts in other subjects were coded as "1". In this context, English literacy events were broadly defined as any learning or instructional activity involving the use of English texts.
  - The material was reexamined to identify comments reflecting variations in English literacy events. Comments were coded based on distinctions between "student-initiated" and "teacher-initiated" English text use and between "written/traditional" and "audio-visual/multimodal" texts. Additionally, comments referencing attitudes and feelings were coded as either more negative or more positive.
- (iii) Category development:
  - Codes were revisited to identify emerging clusters representing broader categories or themes.
  - Four main categories were created, all contributing to the overall theme of English use outside the English subject classes.
  - Attitudes and feelings identified and coded in the comments were integrated across the four categories.
  - Illustrative quotations from the data were selected as examples to clarify the codes and categories.
- (iv) Integration with theory:
  - Theoretical concepts from the background were used to compare, contrast, and contribute to the research findings, moving from concrete quotes to abstract concepts.

In the result section, all student statements were translated from Swedish to English, with spelling and grammar errors corrected to maintain focus. Each student was assigned a pseudonym for anonymity, and their study program was provided in brackets. To enhance credibility, a research colleague provided repeated feedback that refined the second to fourth steps of the analysis.

## 5. Results

Below are the results regarding students' statements about the use of English texts in subjects other than English. Out of the 163 students, 113 students made some form of comment about English literacy events taking place in subjects other than English. The following are selected statements from these 113 students. Four main categories emerged from the students' comments: (1) relative instructional absence of English text use, (2) student-initiated English text use, (3) English films as a medium for information transmission, and (4) occasional instances of English text use in specific subjects or courses.

### 5.1. Relative Instructional Absence of English Text Use

Regarding the use of English texts within the instruction in subjects other than English, a significant lack thereof was reported by 80% of the students. They indicated that reading English texts in subjects outside of English class either never or very rarely occurs. The selected excerpts in this section not only will describe the frequency of English text use

within the instruction but also draw attention to the diverse feelings and perspectives expressed by the students regarding English text use in general:

Tobias: We basically only read English texts in English class. (ECO)

Gulnîshan: From what I know, we haven't read any English texts in other subjects. (SOC)

Lisa: We usually don't use English texts outside of English class, it's mostly Swedish texts. (ART)

Joris: We rarely read English texts in other subjects. (ECO)

Carl-Johan: We almost never read in English in other subjects. (ECO)

Einar: From what I can remember, we very rarely or never have English texts in subjects other than English. (TEC)

Seyoung: We seldom read English texts in other subjects, but sometimes we have to. It is so hard. Every time we're supposed to read a text in English, I feel crappy and stupid. There are so many words that I don't understand. (ART)

From the students' comments, it becomes evident that teachers' instruction in other subjects than English largely excludes the use of English texts for knowledge and information transmission. Taken together, this relative scarcity of English literacy events indicates a general lack of English text practices across subjects. Pertinently, this lack of institutional antecedents [26] aligns poorly with the university-preparation goal in the national curriculum.

These examples primarily address the frequency of English literacy events; however, many students also express feelings and attitudes toward English text use in both upper secondary school and future university studies. Seyoung mentions occasional English text readings in non-English subjects but struggles with unfamiliar vocabulary. Her portrayal of feeling 'crappy' and 'stupid' reflects how the social literacy practice affects self-concept; in this case, when forced to read in English, her sense of agency is lost, and she projects disparaging feelings on herself. Negative sentiments regarding reading in English are common among students' comments. For instance, Hillevi explains her challenges:

Hillevi: We don't read English texts in other subjects. It's very difficult to read English texts in school. I usually ignore the fact that I don't understand them. I often get stuck and don't understand words. I find all English difficult. (SOC)

Hillevi provides an account where reading English texts is perceived as difficult to the extent that she ignores that she merely decodes the words without understanding them. Hillevi's account showcases not only an unfamiliarity with meeting English texts across subjects but also a feeling of resignation due to linguistic demands. From statements such as Hillevi's, it becomes evident that literacy connects to cognitive as well as social dimensions (e.g., [48]).

Relatedly, students provide comments about their sense of readiness for university studies, and about reading English texts at university, with expressions like Belinda's:

Belinda: We don't often read English texts in other subjects, which makes it scary that much is in English at university. (SOC)

Inherently, such a statement depicts a student who is not only unaccustomed to, but also carries fright for English academic literacy practices. This may have implications for students' sense of agency and identity. Tilde, in the excerpt below, expands on this issue:

Tilde: I don't feel prepared to study at the university. Not because I find school difficult, but because I'm afraid there's so much English. English has always been the subject I've struggled with (unlike the other subjects, which I usually do well in). Perhaps this is because I've never been interested in either reading English or watching English films without Swedish subtitles. As I mentioned previously, I

haven't read many books because I find it tedious (to translate all the time). In school, we almost never read English in subjects other than English. (SOC)

It should be noted that there are also students who express confidence in handling English literacy events:

Petter: I find it very easy to understand English and I think much of the content in English courses is relatively easy compared to what I do in my spare time. No other subjects have a significant amount of English in their tasks/lectures. (NAT)

Petter's perspective reflects that of other students who note the infrequent use of English texts outside of English classes but find school texts easier to comprehend than those encountered during their leisure time. This showcases how exposure to English beyond the classroom can enhance students' ability to engage with English input at school. However, it also suggests that schools may not fully meet the equality goal of the national curriculum, as proficiency in school English appears to rely more on out-of-school exposure than formal education.

The statements in this section provide a glimpse into the relative absence of English academic literacy events within upper secondary school instruction, and that this absence aligns poorly with the curriculum requirement of preparing students for university studies. Moreover, the English text practice in upper secondary education—mainly restricted to the English subject classroom—seems to foster not only an unfamiliarity with the English literacy practices of universities but also variations in feelings regarding reading in English. From the statements, emergent patterns revolve around students' negative as well as positive sentiments regarding reading English texts and having to cope with English texts in future tertiary-level studies. These variations reflect different levels of student agency in participating in English academic literacy practices.

While some students exhibit confidence and persistence in navigating English texts for individual assignments, others express apprehension and avoidance. This disparity in student experiences emphasizes the role of engagement, self-efficacy, motivation, and persistence as some determinants of academic success, highlighting the need for institutional antecedents that foster student agency and develop English academic literacy skills among all students.

### 5.2. Student-Initiated English Text Use

Among the 80% of students who stated that English texts in subjects other than English were rarely or never used in instruction, approximately 20% mentioned instances where they engaged in independent English text reading, particularly when searching for information in school assignments. The following examples illustrate this type of English literacy event:

Melvin: English is never used in subjects other than English class. However, when searching for information in subjects other than English, I often read English articles. (SOC)

Cornelia: When gathering facts for assignments, such as history or Swedish, the texts can sometimes be in English. (HUM)

Thep: Sometimes I need to read in English online because there is more information available in English, and then it's in subjects other than English. I think it's completely okay to read in English, I don't have difficulty with it. (SOC)

Bijan: We only read English in English class or when we use online sources by ourselves. (SOC)

Dagny: I'm starting to feel quite prepared for further studies, but I'm a bit nervous about all the English texts at university. I'm not used to formal English. Sometimes we read English texts in other subjects because it's easier to find information and sources in English. I also use English videos and films as sources. (ART)

In these instances, students accentuate the necessity of seeking sources in English to gather information for assignments across various subjects. Particularly noteworthy is Cornelia's observation that English literacy events occur during assignments in the subject of Swedish. Although the specific content of these literacy events remains unspecified, their presence reinforces the predominant role of English as a conduit for transmitting content knowledge within educational settings.

Bijan and Thep's statements imply that these self-initiated English literacy events mainly occur in a digital context, likely involving online sources. This observation indicates that adolescent Swedes predominantly engage in reading digitally rather than in traditional print formats [47]. While the exact texts students were reading cannot be specified, it is likely that these online literacy events involve a multimodal text concept, incorporating written text, images, colors, links to video clips, and more. In Dagny's case, videos are also included as a source, challenging the conventional understanding of what constitutes a text.

In the prior section, students displayed mixed sentiments about reading English as part of their regular instruction. Yet, in this section, they discuss initiating their own English literacy events. While one might anticipate ease in such self-initiated activities, as indicated by Thep, the necessity to access English sources for information suggests otherwise. Consequently, students continue to exhibit diverse attitudes toward English reading, even in self-initiated events. Consider, for instance, Olga's viewpoint:

Olga: Sometimes, for example, when you're working on a writing assignment and need to find sources yourself, it can be an English text. I find it more demanding to read English because you have to translate. (ART)

Olga, like many others, acknowledges that seeking information for school tasks may necessitate reading in English. However, her statement also highlights the challenge of these self-initiated English literacy events. Moreover, her narrative accentuates the cognitive aspect of literacy agency; reading in English is viewed as "demanding" due to linguistic deficiencies, particularly in vocabulary, prompting her to feel the need "to translate". While Olga's perspective reflects a moderate negative sentiment common among several students, others express stronger negative sentiments, as evidenced in Christoffer's testimony:

Christoffer: It might happen that you have to read in English in other subjects, but it's not common. It's usually when you're forced to search for information, and it happens to be in English. I'm really bad at English, so I avoid it as much as I can. For instance, if I don't understand, then I don't give a damn about continuing because I know I won't understand even if I continue trying; I just get angry! (ECO)

Christoffer portrays his self-initiated English text reading as obligatory rather than optional, expressing reluctance and frustration. He perceives himself as lacking control over the literacy demands, leading to feelings of resignation and negativity ("I avoid it as much as I can", "I don't give a damn about continuing"). This perception influences his self-image, defining his English proficiency and identity based on perceived shortcomings and negative emotional responses ("I'm really bad at English", "I just get angry"). The interplay between the social dimension of searching for information for a classroom assignment and the cognitive dimension of literacy is characterized by reciprocity, where the social context (searching for information—only available in English) affects and is affected by the cognitive ability (English proficiency).

Olga and Christoffer are not unique in their attitudes and experiences. However, it is worth noting that some students offer positive perspectives on these self-initiated English literacy events. Meja's viewpoint may exemplify this:

Meja: I would say it varies within each subject based on the type of factual sources we use. It ranges from Swedish texts to English texts to YouTube videos. Personally, I appreciate reading and prefer English. However, I try to adapt to the subject we are studying. In physics, for example, there are many terms I need to

know in Swedish since I attend a Swedish school. But in technology, I sometimes feel there isn't as much Swedish terminology and as many concepts to keep track of, so I read in English. (TEC)

Meja's testimony suggests a focus not on the language or medium itself, but on adapting the reading content to suit the subject, whether in Swedish or English. Her confidence in using Swedish, English, and videos and adjusting to the subject matter reflects a sense of belonging and student agency. Meja demonstrates meta-level reflection on her studies, showing awareness of learning disciplinary vocabulary within physics. This integration of cognitive and social dimensions of literacy is evident in Meja's perspective. Moreover, Meja's mention of YouTube, like Dagny's perspective, reveals that information transmission, whether self-initiated or teacher-initiated, can take various forms beyond writing, such as animation or videos.

This section emphasizes the role of self-initiated English literacy events in shaping student agency, but with a caveat: while students engage independently, the need to access English sources for assignments implies limited voluntariness. The diverse attitudes toward English reading among students highlight the complex interplay between these events and their literacy experiences.

### 5.3. English Films and Video Clips as a Medium for Information Transmission

Although written English texts are seldom mentioned outside the English subject, some students note the frequent use of English films or video clips in subject instruction. This observation echoes Meja's testimony from the previous section, suggesting an interrelation between "reading" and "watching" for students, although these activities may not be entirely equivalent.

Tora: No, we don't read English texts in other subjects, at least not when it comes to reading. However, we watch a lot of clips and films in English. (SOC)

Charles: We rarely read in English in other subjects, maybe a film once in a while, but with Swedish subtitles. (SOC)

Emmie: As far as I know, I rarely read English in other subjects, but sometimes we watch short films in English or with English text. (ART)

Linn: In subjects other than English, there may occasionally be English texts from teachers or if we have to search for information ourselves, but the most common thing is that the films we watch are in English, usually with Swedish subtitles. (SOC)

Salma: We usually don't read English texts in other subjects, but sometimes we watch English documentaries with Swedish translation. (SOC)

As indicated, students often mention that English-spoken films are accompanied by Swedish subtitles, creating a bilingual literacy event. This multimodal input allows for understanding content in multiple ways, benefiting from information presented in two languages. However, when Swedish subtitles are absent, students must contend with English as the language of information transmission, which can pose challenges:

Fredricia: In school, we sometimes watch factual films in English, which I find challenging because when you are learning something new and complex in English, the focus is also on understanding English. (NAT)

Fredricia's statement illustrates how content learning through the medium of English creates a dual cognitive load. She finds it challenging because, when learning something new and complex in English, the focus is divided between understanding the content and grappling with the language itself.

In summary, the student statements in this section draw attention to the use of English films and video clips for knowledge transfer in non-English subjects, offering opportunities for students to engage with English in a multimodal context. While Swedish subtitles aid

comprehension, bridging written Swedish and spoken English, reliance on audiovisual resources alone does not adequately prepare students for reading English in future university studies, limiting the development of their student agency in academic English literacy without appropriate antecedents.

#### 5.4. Occasional English Text Use in Specific Subjects or Courses

This final section focuses on the approximately 20% of students who explicitly mention ‘sometimes’ encountering English texts in instruction outside of the English subject, with none reporting it happening frequently.

Ebba: Sometimes, we read English texts in other subjects. (ECO)

Esmeralda: Sometimes, we can read sources in English during history lessons. (HUM)

Zeta: We sometimes receive theoretical assignments in our dance courses, and then most of the information that we can use as sources is only in English. (ART)

Rasmus: Sometimes, we read a bit of English in photography, art, and film/TV production, but this is exclusively for those of us studying the media specialization. (SOC)

A significant trend observed in these few comments is the occurrence of English literacy events primarily within one or a few specific subjects or courses. This may arise from teachers presenting English texts or from English being the only available language for the given topic.

Mai: Sometimes, we read English texts in the science subjects, where we might study specific research or certain studies. I think it’s great to read English texts that connect the program’s specialization with an internationally used language. (NAT)

Mai’s perspective illuminates the value of integrating English texts into science subjects, serving as a conduit for exploring specialized research and studies—an aspect that Mai particularly appreciates.

Arthur is the only student to mention using English written materials across all subjects:

Arthur: In school assignments, both images, films, and texts are used. English written materials are used in all subjects except Swedish, especially when we need to search for information for an assignment. Sometimes a teacher may also provide us with an English text, but that’s usually some sort of voluntary extension task. I find the most challenging English to be within the scientific subjects, but it’s almost always optional to use it. Nearly all the necessary information for courses can be obtained from sources written in Swedish. Personally, I’m quite inclined to use English texts and films where possible because I find there’s significantly more English written materials on most topics. (NAT)

Arthur notes that English texts may appear across all subjects but are typically optional, as Swedish sources suffice. His inclination towards English texts and films aligns with the theme of ‘student-initiated English literacy events’, showcasing independent information search opportunities regardless of language. Arthur’s strong self-concept regarding content acquisition through English highlights both individual and institutional antecedents fostering his student agency [26]. His preference for English texts is not solely based on perceived proficiency but driven by a desire for content learning, and for him, “there’s significantly more English written materials on most topics” in comparison to Swedish ones. This underscores English’s dominance in academic research and knowledge dissemination across disciplines (cf. [8]).

The instances showcased in this section reveal a sporadic presence of English written materials in specific subjects or courses. While far from ubiquitous, they illustrate how English literacy events can emerge in certain school contexts, providing students with

familiarization with the language beyond the English subject. This exposure can foster student agency in handling English texts to acquire content knowledge, a prominent feature of HE practices.

## 6. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the integration of English literacy events within non-English subjects in upper secondary education in Sweden. Through an exploration of students' narratives, this study sought to illuminate the extent of English text usage, students' attitudes towards reading in English for content learning, and the potential impact of English literacy practices on students' preparedness for university studies. By focusing on these aspects, this study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of how English literacy events may serve as antecedents for developing student agency to be able to cope with the partial English use in HE literacy practices. This section first presents findings in relation to the research prompts before elaborating on central issues and discussing pedagogical implications.

*To what extent do students report the use of English texts in subjects other than English within university preparatory programs in the Swedish upper secondary education system?*

The main findings of this study indicate a notable absence of English text practices within instruction in subjects other than English at the upper secondary level. However, many students mention self-initiating English literacy events, primarily when searching for information for class assignments. Although these self-initiated literacy events may seem voluntary, students recognize that the abundance of English information available often compels them to engage in such activities. Moreover, films/video clips are occasionally incorporated into different subjects, often accompanied by Swedish subtitles, highlighting the multimodal nature of literacy [46]. While occasional written English literacy events are observed in specific courses/subjects, the overall landscape suggests limited English text practices.

*What are the attitudes and feelings of students towards reading in English for content learning, and how does this relate to their student agency development?*

Students present a diverse range of attitudes and feelings towards reading English for content learning. While some express motivation and confidence, others harbor negative sentiments. Certain students find school-based English texts easier than those encountered outside of school, contributing to a positive sense of self-efficacy and competence belief. However, others exhibit a more fragile competence belief, often manifesting as avoidance or resignation. With respect to the national curriculum goal of equality [27], these varied feelings and attitudes suggest an unequal array of individual antecedents for the development of student agency (cf. [26]).

*How may English literacy practices in upper secondary education influence the preparedness of all students for university studies?*

The findings shed light on the intricate relationship between English literacy events in upper secondary education and the curriculum goal of preparing students for university studies. As a general comment, the notable absence of instructional use of English texts outside the English subject classroom highlights a lack of institutional antecedents [25] for developing student agency to cope with future partial use of English in HE literacy practices, particularly concerning assigned reading in English [7].

Having broadly addressed the research prompts, I now adopt an analytical and critical stance toward the findings to offer a deeper discussion.

As outlined in the background, the national curriculum emphasizes the importance of equipping each student with the necessary skills and abilities to succeed in HE [27], where proficiency in English academic literacy is essential. The limited occurrences of English literacy events within planned instruction indicate a systematic lack of English text usage for content learning from the educator perspective. Thus, the instructional literacy

practices in schools, as reported by a significant majority of students, do not include English texts. This absence suggests a misalignment between current instructional practices and the curriculum's goal of preparing students for university. This raises questions about the extent to which institutional antecedents impact students' readiness for English literacy practices in HE. In this respect, the findings of this study provide some insights into the previously observed low levels of English academic reading competence within similar contexts [23,24]. Therefore, there is a need for a more holistic and systematic approach to literacy instruction that integrates English text practices across the curriculum to better align with the expectations and practices of HE, providing opportunities to develop student agency in academic English literacy.

Furthermore, the disparities in student experiences raise concerns about the attainment of the curriculum goal of equality, as not all students appear equally familiar with engaging in English academic literacy practices. As articulated by several students, the limited exposure to English texts in other subjects engenders feelings of apprehension and unpreparedness for the English academic literacy demands encountered at the university level. In this respect, the findings reveal varying levels of student agency in coping with English materials, with some students expressing confidence in their ability and motivation to navigate English texts while others exhibit apprehension and avoidance. This varied pattern in students' self-efficacy and competence beliefs provides insight into the individual antecedents [26] in developing student agency for future English academic reading demands. While the systematic integration of English text practices into instructional activities is almost lacking, students have opportunities to independently engage with English texts for individual assignments, thereby enhancing their content learning as well as their English proficiency, akin to HE practices. This indirect acquisition of academic literacy—which can occur in isolated subjects, with specific teachers, or as initiated by students—contributes to educational inequity. The students in this study demonstrate how different English literacy events make them either familiar or unfamiliar with English, and this discrepancy is an indication of an inequitable preparation for HE. Students who find the thought of university studies scary and frightening (as portrayed by, for example, Belinda and Tilde) showcase how social practices intertwine with psychological and cognitive dimensions related to identities and self-reflection and ultimately affect student agency (cf. [26,48,51,55]).

The arguments in the paragraph above relate to the social practices of literacy, where practices must be understood as the habitual ways in which participants in certain contexts use different resources to create meaning and act within that context (cf. [45]). If we consider literacy as a social practice, then the self-deprecating comments provided by the students in this study are not so much a description of their individual 'stupidity', 'crappiness', or incompetence (as portrayed by, for example, Seyoung, and Christoffer), but rather a reflection of the social school practice. In this case, the notable absence of English text practices does not create a greater sense of security among these students when reading English texts. Therefore, upper secondary school does not adequately prepare students for the social English text practices prevalent at the university level. Instead, it is the students' choice of courses, random teachers, or self-initiated activities that happen to expose them to and familiarize them with such English academic literacy events. Rather than discussing students' lack of skills, we should discuss the school's (i.e., the curriculum's) lack of academic literacy practices or English text practices. This deficiency likely contradicts the equity goal and does not align well with the university preparatory goal within the national curriculum. While revising the upper secondary curriculum is crucial, universities must also support students in English-medium environments by fostering language and academic literacy skills. Accountability should be shared across educational levels, emphasizing a collaborative approach to address challenges in student readiness and equitable access to HE.

It is not particularly difficult to agree with Prince et al. [29] when they argue that "(i)f schooling is to play a more constructive role in preparing students for higher education,

attention must be given to developing ways to improve students' [academic literacy] practices" (p. 176). Regarding the national curriculum's equality goal, diverse attitudes toward English literacy events in university preparatory programs highlight the need for educators to provide scaffolding and support for equitable access to English academic literacies. Integrating English text practices into a broader range of subjects can familiarize students with academic contexts. Initiatives promoting student agency and confidence in using English texts are crucial for a balanced transition to HE, ensuring students are well-prepared [27].

In the context of EMI, the challenges identified in this study resonate with broader international discussions on students' readiness for English-medium HE in non-English-speaking countries and their hurdles in university-level English academic discourse when transitioning from non-English secondary education. Previous studies underscore similar challenges among students entering EMI universities, including issues of linguistic preparedness, self-regulation, and academic literacy development (e.g., [11–14]). While initiatives aimed at enhancing students' English academic literacy skills and student agency may address these challenges, a cautious approach to worldwide EMI implementation is worth considering. Slowing down the pace of EMI adoption would afford educators, policymakers, and researchers across different educational levels the opportunity to systematically address the pedagogical consequences of these language-related challenges (e.g., [11,12]).

Future research should explore interventions aimed at enhancing students' English academic literacy skills and institutional antecedents for developing student agency in English academic practices with greater equity. While this study used students' written comments on English literacy events, the data cannot assess their quality. To this end, ethnographic studies could complement this study. Interviews with students transitioning to HE could validate findings and explore attributes of student agency (cf. [55]). Furthermore, future research could further explore the issues of equity in relation to partial EMI in HE (cf. [58]).

## 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this analysis reveals that English text practices outside of the English subject are rare in upper secondary school; in particular, teacher-initiated reading of English texts is virtually nonexistent. Despite the clear need for English literacy in university studies, the curriculum lacks explicit instruction in English, which is essential for success in HE. Given the importance of English in university contexts and the discomfort expressed by students in reading English texts, the curriculum should reconsider essential content for university preparation. Thus, this study highlights the critical role of incorporating English literacy events across subjects to prepare students for HE and enhance student agency.

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