

# Learning Strategies for Reading and Listening in the Swedish National Syllabus for English

*A Case Study of Four English Language Teachers' Best Practices*



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Term: Spring 2016

Course: ÄENM92 (30 hp)

Degree Thesis (*Examensarbete*)

English for Subject Teachers

(Upper Secondary)

Campus Helsingborg

## **Abstract**

Language learning strategies are presented in several parts of the Swedish national syllabus for English for high school and teachers are expected to both teach learning strategies and to test and grade students' use of them. Despite supporting documents, teachers have expressed an insecurity regarding what in the Swedish national syllabus for English is referred to as “[...] strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English” (Skolverket, 2011a). These issues and the split state of the field of research of language learning strategies motivate the present study, with the purpose of documenting English language teachers' best practices regarding language learning strategies for the receptive language skills, reading and listening. Through a qualitative and interpretative analysis, the present study investigated how language learning strategies are presented and described and how learning strategies for reading and listening can be treated in teaching, testing and assessment by examining Swedish national policy documents and interviews with four English language teachers. The results of this study suggest that learning strategies for the receptive language skills are an important part of English language teaching in the Swedish context. All of the teachers claim to work with strategies in their teaching and specific examples of how to incorporate learning strategies for reading and listening in the teaching are provided by the teachers. However, the analysis revealed that there are issues regarding the testing, assessment and grading of students' use of strategies that arise mainly due to the interpretability of policy documents and due to the characteristics ascribed to language learning strategies. These issues affect how well equitable assessment that respects students' educational rights can be established.

**Keywords:** language learning strategies, strategies for reading, strategies for listening, English language teaching, testing, assessment, policy documents, syllabus.

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During my years at the teacher training program, I have been in contact with teachers of English and modern languages at high school<sup>1</sup> in Sweden both during research projects and during my internships. More than once have these teachers expressed an insecurity regarding the knowledge requirement for the course English 5<sup>2</sup> that treats students' use of strategies for assimilating and evaluating the content of spoken and written English (Skolverket, 2011a).

The concept of strategies can be found in different parts of the Swedish national syllabus for English for high school (Skolverket, 2011a). Strategies are mentioned in both the overarching 'aim of the subject', which describes the purpose of learning English in the Swedish context, as well as in the 'Core content', which describes the intended content of the different courses, and the 'Knowledge requirements', which specify the skills required to receive a certain grade. Thus, strategies are an important aspect of the Swedish national courses of English at high school.

To support teachers in their teaching and assessment of students' skills, the National Agency for Education, Skolverket, provides a commentary (Skolverket, 2011b) to clarify some of the expressions used in the Swedish national syllabus. The general comments related to learning strategies that can be found are as follows:

The ability to use *strategies* is part of the comprehensive communicative competence. Strategies are actions which aim at solving problems or reach a certain effect. The term strategy is defined in CEFR as "every organized, goal-oriented and adjusted actions that an individual chooses in order to complete a task that he/she sets as a goal or is confronted with." Within language didactics the term strategy is used in relation to learning a language, communication and to compensate for lacks in the linguistic ability. Strategies are used for example when reading and for understanding the

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<sup>1</sup> High school refers to the Swedish 'gymnasieskola', school years 11-13

<sup>2</sup> English 5 is the first course of English that is taught at high school-level in Sweden, and it corresponds to the CEFR B1.2 Threshold level

content of spoken language, as well as in the processing of oral and written productions. Within each area different types of strategies may occur. The students' different strategies can be conscious and unconscious. They can also be more or less efficient and appropriate. When the students "develop the ability to use strategies" they expand their repertoire of appropriate strategies. (Skolverket, 2011b; translation mine)

The same commentary material also specifies the expressions used in the knowledge requirements, where the use of strategies for listening and reading with different degrees of certainty separates the different grades for the course English 5:

The term **certainty** indicates how skilled the student is. In connection to strategies for assimilation, **with some certainty** implies that the student has a relatively good ability to use different ways of assimilating the content of spoken and written language and to evaluate the content or search for relevant information, structure it and evaluate the reliability of different sources. **With certainty** implies that the student masters the use of appropriate strategies well. (Skolverket, 2011b; translation mine)

These different texts should function as a guide for teachers and help them to understand how to work with and assess learners' use of strategies in the classroom. In my experience though, it appears that these publications are not enough to help teachers understand the formulations found in the knowledge requirements for the course English 5, since learning strategies are an ever occurring topic during teacher conferences.

An examination of the field of research of language learning strategies reveals a split state, where multiple systems for classification of different strategies (e.g. Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011) exist more or less independently of each other.

Furthermore, numerous studies investigating learners' use of strategies (e.g. Chou, 2013; Halbach, 2000) have been made, but their results are often indecisive and not transferable.

These are the underlying issues that motivate the present study. The purpose of this study is to document best practices (*beprövad erfarenhet*) of English language teachers in regards to what Skolverket in the Swedish national Syllabus for English refers to as “[...] strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English” (2011a). This study consists of a qualitative and interpretative analysis of two documents. Based on discourse analysis methodology presented by Gee (2011) and coding techniques presented by Saldaña (2013), an analysis of the Swedish national policy documents that are related to this issue and interviews with four teachers of English currently teaching at high school-level in Sweden is conducted.

The hope is that the results of this study will help in-service teachers as well as pre-service teachers in their work by providing possible ways of dealing with learning strategies in English language teaching. In extension, the results of this study might to some extent evaluate the efficiency of the Swedish national syllabus for English in terms of how well it establishes equitable assessment that respects students' educational rights (*rättsäker och likvärdig bedömning*) regarding this specific knowledge requirement. Thus, this study might affect how future policy documents are constructed.

The next section presents theories and empirical research within the field of language learning strategies, as well as the practical implications of those in language learning and teaching. The following section presents the current study, both in terms of methodological foundation, instruments and procedures, as well as the analysis yielded and an enclosed discussion. In the final section, a discussion of the implications of the present study is provided.

## **Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Language Learning Strategies**

The field of research of second (L2) or foreign language (FL) learning strategies first saw the light of day in the 1970's and -80's. The focus was on effective or good language learners, what characterizes them, and what strategies they use (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Since then the research has come to include language learners of different levels (e.g. Goh, 2002; Halbach, 2000; Oxford, Cho, Leung & Kim, 2004), as well as the use of strategies for different kinds of language tasks (e.g. Chou, 2013; Goh, 2002). The field of research has seen several attempts to classify language learning strategies (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) and to define key terminology (e.g. Cohen, 2007). Possibly due to the wide spread of research within the field and the many applications of learning strategies in language teaching and learning, the field of research of language learning strategies is still fractured today.

### **Defining Language Learning Strategies**

There are different terms for the strategies used by language learners. For example, Cohen and Macaro (2007) edited an anthology entitled *Language Learner Strategies*. However, according to Oxford (2011), the term *language learning strategies* is the preferred one since it suggests a focus on strategies for learning and in addition most researchers use it (p. 13). Thus, the term *language learning strategies* is adopted in the present study.

There are a number of different definitions of the term *language learning strategies*. One definition is presented by Rebecca Oxford (1990), who describes language learning strategies as “[...] specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations” (p. 8). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define language learning strategies as “[...] the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information”

(p. 1). A more recent definition is provided by Griffiths (2008), who describes language learning strategies as “[...] activities consciously chosen by learners for the purpose of regulating their own language learning” (cited in Griffiths & Oxford, 2014, p. 2).

Though somewhat similar, these different definitions of the term *language learning strategies* are based on different underlying ideologies and theories. These differences are evident in the results of a study conducted by Cohen (2007). Through a survey, Cohen investigated how 19 language learning strategy experts define and conceptualize important terminology in language learning strategy research. The results of this study suggest that there are two main theories of language learner strategy research. On the one hand there is the idea that strategies need to be small, specific, and combined with other strategies. On the other hand there are researchers who believe that strategies need to be global, flexible and general. However, there is a general agreement that strategies can make language learning easier, faster and more enjoyable and that strategies help learners improve their language learning and language use. The researchers also agree that strategies are not a means of compensating for lacks in the learners’ knowledge or studying techniques.

Other than a multitude of definitions of the term *language learning strategies*, there are also different ways of classifying language learning strategies, as we shall see in the next section.

### **Classifying Language Learning Strategies**

The results of Cohen’s (2007) study and the mere existence of such a study show that the field of research of language learning strategies is split. This idea is further strengthened by the fact that there are numerous systems for classification of language learning strategies that have been developed independently or in response to one another. As a result, Griffiths (2008, 2013, cited in Griffiths & Oxford, 2014) proposes that attempts to classify learning strategies



should not be made before but rather after thematic analyses. However, Griffiths and Oxford (2014) argue that language learning researchers instead need to collaborate in order to find a functioning classification system. This collaboration has not been achieved yet and this field of research is still in need of a unification in terms of classifying learning strategies and in terms of defining key terminology. Nonetheless, an effort to present language learning strategies derived from the most well-known language learning classification systems will be made below.

The language learning strategies presented below are based on three different classification systems. The first is a classification scheme presented by Michael O'Malley and Anna Uhl Chamot (1990). Their idea of learning strategies is based on an "if...then" causal relation, where certain objectives of language learning require certain measures. The second is a system presented by Rebecca Oxford (1990) consisting of a total of six main categories of strategies. This language learning system has later been developed and refined into the S<sup>2</sup>R Model of language learning strategies (Oxford, 2011), which is the third model presented here. This model is highly focused on the idea of self-regulation in learning, i.e. that the learner is in charge of his/her own learning by engaging in certain processes, such as setting goals for learning, using effective strategies to organize and rehearse information, and monitoring performance. This means that the term *language learning strategies* has been renamed and redefined: "[...] *self-regulated L2 learning strategies* are defined as deliberate, goal-directed attempts to manage and control efforts to learn the L2" (Oxford, 2011, p. 12; based on Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008). Another important feature of the S<sup>2</sup>R Model is the distinction between strategies and tactics, where the latter refers to "[...] the specific, applied way or ways in which a strategy is being used to meet a goal in a particular situation and instance" (Oxford, 1990, as cited in Oxford, 2011, p. 31). Strategies are thus the underlying mental processes, whereas tactics are the resulting actions of strategies.

The three aforementioned classification systems for language learning strategies all have in common the distinction between cognitive, affective, and social strategies. Furthermore they all include metacognitive strategies, and the S<sup>2</sup>R model (Oxford, 2011) also includes meta-affective and meta-sociocultural-interactive (meta-SI) strategies.

Reviewing important theories on language learning strategies shows that the largest category of strategies is *cognitive strategies*. These are strategies that help the learner memorize information (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011), practice, understand and produce messages, and create structure for input and output (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011). Cognitive strategies for memorizing include strategies such as rehearsing (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and using the senses to remember (Oxford, 2011). Cognitive strategies for practicing are for example recombining known language (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), recognizing and using formulas and patterns (Oxford, 1990), and transferring knowledge to new situations (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Strategies for understanding and producing messages are for example using the senses to understand (Oxford, 2011) and guessing the meaning of unknown words, also known as inferencing (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011) (this is a compensation strategy in Oxford, 1990). Other strategies for understanding and producing language are getting the idea quickly (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), linking new information with already known information (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), and translating (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011). Analyzing and reasoning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) are also cognitive strategies for understanding new language. Oxford (2011) also includes a category of cognitive strategies for activating knowledge, for example by brainstorming. Cognitive strategies for creating structure for input and output are classifying and categorizing (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011), summarizing (O'Malley &

Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), taking notes (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), and highlighting (Oxford, 1990).

Another common category of strategies in the existing literature is *metacognitive strategies*. These are strategies that help the learner concentrate, plan or evaluate his/her learning. Examples of metacognitive strategies include deciding to pay attention to specific aspects of the language or language tasks (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) and organizing and planning both the language learning (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) and specific language tasks (Oxford, 2011). Other metacognitive strategies are identifying the purpose of a language task (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) and seeking practice opportunities (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011). Important metacognitive strategies are also monitoring and evaluating learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011).

Another category of strategies is *affective strategies*. These are strategies that help the learner to manage emotions, beliefs, and attitudes that are tied to the language learning process (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011). Examples of affective strategies are making positive statements to encourage oneself (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), lowering stress through relaxation techniques (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), and increasing motivation through interest (Oxford, 2011).

The S<sup>2</sup>R Model (Oxford, 2011) includes a meta-dimension to affective strategies. *Meta-affective strategies* help the learner to plan, organize and monitor affect, for example by paying attention to situations that create stress and plan for future actions to reduce these stressful situations (Oxford, 2011).

*Social strategies*, or *sociocultural-interactive (SI) strategies*, are strategies that involve interaction (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) and sociocultural

contexts (Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011). Social strategies are used when the learner asks for clarification or verification (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), the learner cooperates with a peer or a proficient user of the target language (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011), the learner overcomes knowledge gaps in communication by phrasing him-/herself differently (Oxford, 2011)(this is a compensation strategy in Oxford, 1990), or where the learner explores socio-cultural contexts and identities (Oxford, 2011).

In the S<sup>2</sup>R Model (Oxford, 2011) a meta-dimension to SI-strategies is included. *Meta-SI strategies* help the learner plan, organize and monitor context, communication and culture, for example by using techniques to keep the communication going (Oxford, 2011).

The above presented systems and categories of language learning strategies illustrate how language learning strategies have been categorized and classified. Another researcher, Macaro (2006), debates for another way of describing language learner strategies. Instead of trying to classify strategies, they could be described as having three characterizing features: (a) they should be described in terms of a goal, a situation, and a mental action (cf. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), (b) they “[...] are the raw material of conscious cognitive processing [...]” (Macaro, 2006, p. 325), and their degree of effectiveness is dependent on the way they are used independently and together (cf. Oxford, 2011), and (c) they are not subconscious activities, language learning processes, skills, learning plans, or learning styles. Macaro's (2006) foundation is yet another theoretical framework, and he admits that empirical studies must be made to support his theory.

From a theoretical perspective, strategies are defined and classified in different ways depending on which theoretical foundation is the reigning one. This is also echoed in the practical applications of language learning strategy theories and research, as is seen in the following sections.

## **Teaching Language Learning Strategies**

The above presented theories on language learning strategies have practical implications on language learning and teaching. Theorists and researchers have proposed different ways of working with language learning strategies. For example, Oxford (1990) proposes an eight-step model of strategy training to be part of second and foreign language teaching and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) advocates for strategy training integration in teaching through the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). Both of these include direct and concrete training of how and when to use language learning strategies.

Today, strategy training is an integral part of language teaching (e.g. Coyle, 2007; Grenfell, 2007; Halbach, 2000) and there is indeed a need for strategy training in language teaching (Halbach, 2000). More recent theoretical papers and empirical studies highlight the fact that teaching learning strategies requires a metalanguage similar to the one used when teaching grammar (Grenfell, 2007) and therefore strategy training should not be taught explicitly but rather through the context of a strategic classroom that promotes the development of strategies independent of the content of the teaching (Coyle, 2007; Grenfell, 2007). In his study based on classroom observations, Coyle (2007) builds on sociocultural theory to explore how the classroom context influences opportunities for language learning strategy development among students. The results indicate that important factors for the development of learning strategies are the classroom culture, scaffolding learning, and creating learning opportunities. Coyle (2007) advocates that strategic classrooms are a strong foundation for strategy training.

## **Learners' use of Language Learning Strategies**

Other than focusing on learning strategies in language teaching, studies have investigated language learners' use of strategies. When examining these studies, it becomes evident that

the results of Cohen's (2007) study, which showed that there is an agreement among researchers that learners' use of strategies is dependent on variables such as the learner, the task and the environment, are highly current. This is clearly reflected in the number and spread of studies on language learners' use of strategies that have been made. Below are presented a handful of empirical studies on the issue of L2/FL learning strategy use in reading and listening. Since the focal point of the present study is not on learners' use of strategies, these issues will only be addressed briefly here.

Studies focused on L2/FL language learners' use of strategies for reading are common. For example, a study conducted by Chou (2013) investigated what strategies English as a foreign language (EFL) university students use when reading two different types of articles in both a nontesting and testing context through a questionnaire, interviews and retrospective verbal reports. The results suggest that in nontesting contexts the students use a number of different cognitive strategies, such as consulting a dictionary, taking notes of new vocabulary, returning to the passages, and translating into the L1, more frequently when faced with a more advanced text. In a testing context, the students use less cognitive strategies and rely more on test management strategies, such as reading questions several times, going back to check answers, and saving the more difficult questions for last, especially when faced with a more advanced text.

In a similar study conducted by Oxford, Cho, Leung, and Kim (2004) English as a second language (ESL) students' answers to three different questionnaires, of which two contained reading tasks of differing level, were analyzed. The results of the questionnaires show that when faced with a difficult reading task, low-proficiency learners use more strategies than high-proficiency learners. Though, the authors suggested that the strategies used by the low-proficiency learners might not be beneficial to them.

Studies investigating ESL or EFL learners' use of strategies in listening are in comparison to the width of the field quite scarce, especially those concerned with advanced language learners. One study conducted by Goh (2002), with the aim of investigating what strategies and tactics ESL learners use when completing a listening comprehension task, is based on immediate ('think-aloud') and delayed retrospective verbal reports. The results of this study indicate that the students use both cognitive listening tactics, such as inferencing, elaboration, prediction, translation, contextualization and visualization, and metacognitive listening tactics, such as self-monitoring, comprehension monitoring, selective attention and self-evaluation.

Another study based on a questionnaire was conducted by Zhang and Goh (2006). The data was collected from a questionnaire consisting of 40 strategy-items, derived from the following four categories: use-focused strategies (learner initiative to learn to use English), form-focused strategies (learner initiative for developing the form-related aspects), comprehension strategies (how students attempt to make sense of the spoken text) and communication strategies (how learners cope when their knowledge lacks). The results of the study suggest that the students believe all four categories of strategies to be useful, but that they most likely employ use-focused strategies. The authors concluded that this implies that the students are aware of the usefulness of different strategies, but that they do not know how and/or when to use them or if they use them.

The results of the different studies on learners' use of strategies presented above suggest that low-proficiency learners use more strategies when they are faced with a difficult reading task than high-proficiency learners (Oxford et al., 2004). However, both high-performing and low-performing learners use both cognitive and metacognitive strategies when completing listening tasks (Goh, 2002). In a non-testing reading situation, learners use

more cognitive strategies, whereas in a testing context they use more general strategies for testing (Chou, 2013).

In a study based on analyses of students' diaries conducted by Halbach (2000), learners' overall use of strategies was investigated. The analysis of the diaries shows that the students only account for their use of meta-cognitive strategies. There is also a difference between the students in their strategy use in general and it seems as though the more successful students use strategies more frequently (cf. Oxford et al., 2004). However, Halbach (2000) stressed the fact that it is difficult to claim that there is a causal relationship between strategy use and academic performance or vice versa. The more successful students are better at explaining their use of strategies and they seem to benefit more from the strategy-training than the less successful students. Halbach (2000) concluded that there is a need for strategy-training in specific areas, such as critical self-awareness.

As is evident from the above presented studies, there are many different methods that have been used for measuring learners' use of strategies. In the section below, methods for eliciting data of learners' use of strategies are discussed.

### **Testing Learners' use of Language Learning Strategies**

The results from Zhang and Goh's (2006) study imply that learners are not always aware of their use of strategies, whereas Halbach's (2000) study show that the successful learners in her study were able to explain their use of strategies. These differing results are highly linked to the idea of the level of consciousness and observability of learning strategies. Most theorists and researchers seem to agree that learning strategies are conscious mental actions (e.g. Macaro, 2006; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) that can be automatized (e.g. Oxford, 1990). Since learning strategies are internal, they are not directly observable (e.g. Oxford, 2011;



White, Schramm & Chamot, 2007). However, according to Oxford (2011) tactics are sometimes, but not always, observable.

Consequently, these characteristics of language learning strategies have implications for how testing and assessment of learners' use of strategies should be conducted. White, Schramm and Chamot (2007) propose that learning strategies can only be measured through self-report. In this spirit, many questionnaires have been developed (see for example Oxford, 1990; Vandergift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006) and surveys have been utilized in numerous studies (e.g. Zhang & Goh, 2006).

Criticism has been directed toward studies that are solely based on general surveys or questionnaires, since learners' use of strategies varies with the task and situation (White, Schramm & Chamot, 2007). This has resulted in questionnaires that include a specific language task, of which the study by Oxford et al. (2004) is one example. The purpose of their study was to investigate what effect the presence or absence of a reading task has on students' reported use of strategies. The study was based on three different questionnaires, where the first contained 35 reading strategy items with a five-point Likert scale. The second questionnaire consisted of an easy reading passage with five reading comprehension questions, as well as the same 35 reading strategy items as the first questionnaire. The last questionnaire contained a difficult reading passage with five reading comprehension questions and the same 35 reading strategy items. The authors concluded that future survey-studies on L2 learners' strategy use should include task-based questionnaires. Furthermore, it is important to consider both the nature of the task, the difficulty of the task and the learners' proficiency level, as well as to focus on individual strategies and not the overall strategy use among learners.

As we have seen previously, other common methods for investigating students' use of learning strategies include diaries (e.g. Halbach, 2000), both immediate and retrospective

verbal reports (e.g. Goh, 2002), and observations (e.g. Coyle, 2007). White, Schramm and Chamot (2007) propose that future studies should opt for a combination of several different qualitative methods (e.g. Chou, 2013).

To summarize, the field of research of second language learning strategies is in a split state. There are various ways of defining learning strategies, as well as numerous different classification schemes. Many empirical studies have been conducted within the field, but results are often ambiguous and not transferable or generalizable. These factors in combination with the possibly vague formulations of policy documents that treat learning strategies in the Swedish high school context, are the underlying issues motivating the present study.

### **The Present Study**

The purpose of the present study is document English language teachers' best practices regarding learning strategies for the receptive language skills, which Skolverket refers to as “[...] strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English” (2011a).

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. How do the Swedish national syllabus for English 5 and other related policy documents present the notion of learning strategies for the receptive language skills, reading and listening?
2. How do teachers of English in Sweden interpret the formulations related to learning strategies for the receptive language skills found in the Swedish national syllabus for English 5?
3. According to in-service teachers, what are the practical implications of the formulations of the Swedish national syllabus for English 5 regarding learning strategies for the receptive language skills?

In order to answer the three research questions, this study consists of a textual analysis of two main sources of data conducted according to discourse analysis methodology presented by Gee (2011) and coding techniques presented by Saldaña (2013). Research question number 1 is addressed by analyzing the Swedish national syllabus and related policy documents that treat the issue of strategies for the receptive language skills. Research questions number 2 and 3 are addressed by interviewing four teachers of English currently teaching at senior high school-level in Sweden and analyzing their responses. Through the analysis of the interviews the teachers' best practices regarding learning strategies is presented. Thus, this study consists of multiple case studies, which are qualitative in nature (e.g. Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015; Nunan, 2012) and the methods of analysis are interpretative (e.g. Gee, 2011; Saldaña, 2013).

Since this study is focused on policy documents and how teachers interpret them, the above presented methods seem to be most appropriate. The policy document analysis yields an understanding of these documents, while the teacher interviews bring valuable insight to the teachers' experiences and apprehensions (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015; Seidman, 1998) of the formulations of the Swedish national syllabus that are related to learning strategies for understanding spoken and written English. These two sources of data are then compared and contrasted.

### **Methods for Data Collection**

In this section, the two sources of data, the policy documents and the teacher interviews, and the methods for collecting the data are presented.

**Documents.** The first source of data that was used in this study consists of two different policy documents. These documents were chosen for an analysis since they are

either the policy documents that steer the teaching of English at high school in Sweden, or policy documents that are available as an aid for teachers in understanding and interpreting the formulations of the Swedish national syllabus. The documents were retrieved from Skolverket's web-page ([www.skolverket.se](http://www.skolverket.se)).

The first document that was analyzed is the Swedish national syllabus for English, published by Skolverket in 2011. As mentioned previously, Strategies for the receptive language skills are present in different parts of the Swedish national syllabus for English and more specifically, for the course called English 5. Strategies are mentioned in both the "aim of the subject", the "core content" and the "knowledge requirements".

The second document that was analyzed is a policy document published by Skolverket called *Commentary on the subject of English (Ämneskommentarer Engelska)*. This document provides comments to some of the formulations of the national syllabus. The comments related to strategies were analyzed in this study.

**Participants.** The second source of data that was used in this study consists of teacher interviews. The participants were chosen on the basis of a number of different criteria: (a) the participants were teachers of English, (b) the participants were teaching at high school-level in Sweden, (c) they were currently teaching the course *English 5* or taught the course *English 5* during the previous school year, (d) they had an interest in learning strategies. This kind of selection of informants is known as *criterion based selection (kriteriebaserat urval)* (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015, p. 56).

The participants were recruited by contacting different high schools in the south of Sweden via e-mail, requesting teachers who fulfilled the criteria stated above who were interested in participating in the study to respond to the e-mail or to call me. The e-mail contained general information about the study and what was expected of the participants (Seidman, 1998). 17 schools were contacted in order to find as many participants as possible.

The schools were chosen based on what type of educational programs, i.e. college preparatory or vocational, they offer, where a variety of different types of schools was opted for. A total of six schools responded to my initial e-mail. However, teachers from only three of the schools participated in the study.

Based on the four criteria listed above, a total of four teachers were chosen for this study. To guard their identities anonymous, the participants have been given the pseudonyms: Eva, Edith, Emma, and Elisa.

Eva has been teaching for one year, but has worked as a temporary teacher before that. She teaches the course English 5 at the business program and restaurant program, which are both vocational programs. Eva also teaches the courses English 6 and 7 to students from both college preparatory and vocational programs. Her other subject is Swedish as a second language. Eva's mother tongue is English.

Edith has been teaching for approximately 30 years. She teaches the courses English 5, 6 and 7 at the natural science and social science programs, which are both college preparatory. For English 7 she also teaches the variation course Cambridge Advanced English. Edith's other subject is French and her mother tongue is Swedish.

Emma does not teach the course English 5 this school year, but did last year. She teaches English 7 at the humanist, social science, natural science, and esthetic program, which are college preparatory. Her other subject is French and she has been teaching for approximately 20 years. Emma's mother tongue is Swedish.

Elisa teaches the courses English Introduction, English 5 and English 6. She teaches the course English 5 at the program for construction workers, which is a vocational program. Her other subject is Spanish. Elisa has been teaching for a total of 25 years, of which 17 or 18 in Sweden and approximately five years at high school. Elisa's mother tongue is Arabic, but her dominant language is English.

**Instruments and procedures.** The teacher interviews were semi-structured (Nunan, 2012; Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015) in the sense that they were based on a series of pre-determined questions that were occasionally followed by spontaneous follow-up questions, depending on the nature of the participants' responses. The first part of the interview consisted of a series of questions regarding some basic information about the participants. The second part of the interview, which was the main part, consisted of open-ended questions that were, as far as possible, not leading. The questions in the main part of the interview were formulated on basis of the existing literature and theories on learning strategies, as well as the Swedish policy documents related to this topic.

The interview manuscript was outlined according to established interviewing practices (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015; Nunan, 2012; Seidman, 1998). First, I introduced myself and the project and gave the participant information about anonymity and consent to participate in the study. Then followed a series of questions to establish some basic facts about the participant. The main part of the interview manuscript was outlined starting with general questions about the theme, learning strategies. Then followed a series of questions that sought to investigate the participant's own experiences of the topic. After this, more specific and complicated questions were asked. To finish the interview, more general questions were posed, and the participant was given the opportunity to add any final comments.

The interview questions were also formulated with the methodology presented by Christoffersen and Johannessen (2015) and Seidman (1998) in mind. It was important that the questions were short and clear. To opt for detailed responses, most of the questions were also specific and concrete. Furthermore, why-questions were not used in order to avoid a threatening tone. The follow-up questions were intended to make the participant reflect

deeper. The participants were also encouraged to ask questions themselves. The entire interview manuscript can be found in Appendices A and B.

Before the first teacher interview, a pilot interview was conducted. This was done to ensure that the interview questions were clear and phrased in a way that did not make the participants feel uncomfortable or ill at ease. The pilot interview also gave some indication of how much time the interview would require. Since the focus of the pilot interview was to test clarity and the phrasing of the interview questions, it was not required that the participant was an in-service teacher. Therefore, a teacher training student in English, graduating the same year as the study was conducted, was chosen for the pilot interview. After the pilot interview, the student participant and I reflected on the nature of the questions together. This discussion confirmed that the questions were phrased in a clear way and that they did not make the participant feel uncomfortable. Thus, the interview manuscript did not need any alterations.

The teacher interviews were conducted during a two-week period in the spring of 2016. All of the interviews were conducted in the participants' workplaces at a time and day that best suited the participants. The interviews with Eva, Edith and Elisa were conducted in the morning, and the interview with Emma was conducted in the afternoon. All of the interviews were between 25 and 50 minutes long.

In order to ensure that no vital information was lost, all of the teacher interviews were recorded with the help of a mobile phone (Trost, 2005). The Interviews were later transcribed by using a computer and a regular word processing program. It might be considered unjust to transcribe speech verbatim, since the spoken and the written language are different and the participants might feel embarrassed or ashamed of how they have phrased themselves orally (Trost, 2005). Therefore, the entire speech was transcribed but changed so that grammar and syntax for the most part concurred with the conventions of writing.

In order to establish rapport with the participants, we engaged in small talk, mainly about the participants' workplaces, before the actual interview (Seidman, 1998). The participants were also given the choice of conducting the interview in English or Swedish. This would, hopefully, create a more symmetrical relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (Nunan, 2012), by making the participants feel more comfortable and feel that they could express themselves. Three interviews were conducted in Swedish and one interview (Elisa) was conducted in English. The parts of the transcriptions of the Swedish interviews that were to be quoted were translated into English.

### **Methods for Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data that was gathered through the Swedish policy documents and the teacher interviews, discourse analysis methodology adopted from Gee (2011) and methods for coding data presented by Saldaña (2013) were chosen for the present study. These methodological approaches and the procedures of data analysis are described in detail in this section.

**Tools and procedures.** In order to approach and interpret the Swedish policy documents presented in the previous section, discourse analysis methodology presented by Gee (2011) was adopted. Gee (2011) stresses the fact that though many discourse analysts focus on the linguistic and grammatical part of language, it is possible to, instead, "[...] concentrate on ideas, issues and themes as they are expressed in talk and writing" (Gee, 2011, p. ix). Thus, ideas, issues and themes were the focus of this discourse analysis of the Swedish national syllabus for English and the other related policy documents.

Gee (2011) presents 27 different "tools" for conducting discourse analysis. These tools are questions that the researcher asks of the data. For the discourse analysis in this study, I applied a number of tools, i.e. questions, to the data. These tools can be said to derive from



Gee's (2011) tool called *The Big "D" Discourse Tool*, which asks questions about the writer, the reader, the context, values, beliefs, actions etc. Some of the tools adopted in this study are further inspired by one of Gee's (2011) other tools, while others have been constructed to fit this particular study. The following questions were used to analyze the data:

1. What information about learning strategies is the text providing the reader with?
2. What activities is the text proposing? (cf. Tool #15: The activities building tool (Gee, 2011, p. 98)).
3. What is the writer trying to do? (cf. Tool #7: The doing and not just saying tool (Gee, 2011, p. 45)).
4. What previous knowledge does the text assume that the reader already has?

These questions yielded an interpretative analysis of the policy documents, and aided a comparison between these documents and the results from the teacher interviews. Each of the policy documents was examined separately by asking each of the four questions listed above. The interpretive answers to each question was noted down, with an indication of words, phrases or sentences from the text that supported the answers.

For the analysis of the participants' responses from the teacher interviews, coding methods presented by Saldaña (2013) were used. Coding the data means that you assign a piece of spoken or written language with a word or a short phrase as an attribute to that piece of data (Saldaña, 2013). For this study, I employed an elemental method called *descriptive coding* (Saldaña, 2013, p. 87). This coding method is used to identify the topic of a passage of text.

In order to code the interviews, the transcriptions were printed in hard-copy with double spacing and extra wide margin. This enabled the underlining and highlighting of

different parts of the text as well as the noting down of codes. Specific passages of text were assigned with *descriptive codes*. Each code described the topic of a specific passage of text. This means that several different passages of text could be assigned the same code (see example 1 below), and one passage of text could be assigned several codes (see example 2 below). Each code was color-coded in order to facilitate the grouping of codes later.

Example 1: “[...] and then reading for detail” (Eva)

= code: *Listening/reading for detail*

“[...] and then you read or listen one more time in order to find details” (Eva)

= code: *Listening/reading for detail*

Example 2: “It’s the same thing there; that they have a text in their group and

they get to think about which words they will need in order to retell it”  
(Edith)

= Codes: *Preparing & Cooperating with peers*

The codes were formulated during the reading of the transcriptions. However, most of the codes derived from important theories of language learning strategies, previous research within the field, and the discourse analysis of the policy documents. Thus, specific codes could be traced back to both the existing literature and the analysis of the policy documents, which facilitated the entire analysis and discussion of the different texts and documents.

After this first cycle of coding, a revision of the material and codes was made twice since “[...] coding is a cyclical act” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 8). Then, the method of *code mapping* (Saldaña, 2013, p. 194) was used to group the different codes into categories and

subcategories. This was done by first listing all of the 49 codes that emerged during the *descriptive coding*, and then grouping codes that treated related things. This resulted in seven groups of codes that formed subcategories of two main categories as is shown below:

Defining, describing and exemplifying language learning strategies

Defining language learning strategies

Language learning strategies for listening and reading

Language learning strategies for completing tests

General/other language learning strategies

Interpreting policy documents for teaching, testing and assessment of language learning strategies

Teaching language learning strategies

Testing and assessing language learning strategies

Structural issues

These categories and sub-categories have similarities to some of the different questions used for the discourse analysis of the national policy documents as well as the existing literature in the field. For example, the first sub-category of codes *Defining language learning strategies* corresponds both to different definitions of learning strategies that can be found in the literature, and to the first question of the discourse analysis “what information about learning strategies is the text providing the reader with?”. Similarly, the sub-category of codes *teaching language learning strategies* corresponds to previous research within the field and to the second question of the discourse analysis “what activities is the text proposing?”. These categories and subcategories also formed the structure of the next section, which presents the analysis and discussion of the policy documents and the teacher interviews.

## **Interpretations of the Swedish Policy Documents and Teachers' Best Practices**

### **Regarding Language Learning Strategies for the Receptive Language Skills**

The textual analysis of the teacher interviews and the policy documents revealed two main categories of themes. The first, which is presented in the section below, is related to how learning strategies are defined, described and exemplified by the policy documents and the teachers both in general and specifically for the receptive language skills, reading and listening. The second, which is presented in the following section, is related to how teachers work with learning strategies in their teaching of English and how they test and assess students' use of strategies for the receptive language skills.

**Defining, describing and exemplifying language learning strategies.** As we shall see in the following sections, the policy documents and the teachers present, describe, define and exemplify language learning strategies in different ways. In the section below, definitions of learning strategies as they are presented by the policy documents and the teachers are presented.

*Defining language learning strategies.* The excerpt that best describes and defines learning strategies is derived from the commentary material that accompanies the Swedish national syllabus:

The ability to use strategies is part of the comprehensive communicative competence. Strategies are actions which aim at solving problems or reach a certain effect. The term strategy is defined in CEFR as “every organized, goal-oriented and adjusted action that an individual chooses in order to complete a task that he/she sets as a goal or is confronted with.” Within language didactics the term strategy is used in relation to learning a language, communication and to compensate for lacks in the linguistic ability. Strategies are used for example when reading and for understanding the

content of spoken language, as well as in the processing of oral and written productions. Within each area different types of strategies may occur. The students' different strategies can be conscious and unconscious. They can also be more or less efficient and appropriate. When the students "develop the ability to use strategies" they expand their repertoire of appropriate strategies. (Skolverket, 2011b, translation mine)

This excerpt provides many characteristics and descriptions of learning strategies. Firstly, this text presents learning strategies as ways of solving problems. This is in line with the diary-study presented by Halbach (2000), where the students were asked to note down problems that they encountered when working with the language. However, according to theoretical definitions of the term (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011), learning strategies are not only focused on solving problems.

Secondly, strategies are described as organized and goal-oriented actions. This correlates well to O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) "if...then" causal relation of a goal and strategies that are used to achieve that goal. This relation between an objective and action is also seen in Macaro's (2006) first characteristic of learning strategies, as well as in Oxford's (2011) definition of self-regulated L2 learning strategies.

Thirdly, according to the excerpt above, learning strategies are described as compensatory procedures when the learner's knowledge lacks. This is in accordance with Oxford's (1990) taxonomy, where an entire category of strategies is called *compensation strategies*, and partly with the S<sup>2</sup>R Model, which includes the SI strategy *overcoming knowledge gaps in communication*. The idea of strategies being compensatory is however refuted by the study conducted by Cohen (2007), where all the participating researchers agreed that strategies are not employed to compensate for lacks in the learner's knowledge.

Fourthly, Skolverket's (2011b) commentary material suggests that there are several different strategies that can be used in different situations, that strategies can be more or less efficient, and that through practice students can develop their ability to use appropriate strategies. The idea of the existence of several types of strategies is supported by all literature in the field and not least the presence of different classification systems (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011). That strategies can be of differing level of efficiency is supported by the study conducted by Oxford et al. (2004), which indicate that low-proficiency learners use more strategies than high-proficiency learners possibly due to the fact that the strategies that they employ are not efficient enough. Learning strategies' level of efficiency is closely linked to the idea of strategy training, in which learners can develop the ability to use appropriate strategies in different situations (e.g. Coyle, 2007; Oxford, 1990).

Lastly, the above presented excerpt indicates that learning strategies can be both conscious and unconscious. This correlates to Oxford's (1990) idea of automatization of strategies, and is strengthened by the conclusions made in the study by Zhang and Goh (2006), which suggest that students are not always aware of their use of strategies. However, most researchers seem to believe that strategies are conscious mental actions (e.g. Macaro, 2006; Oxford, 2011), which is supposedly supported by the common belief that strategies can be taught and learned (e.g. Oxford, 1990; Skolverket, 2011a&b).

The excerpt from the commentary material (Skolverket, 2011b) presents and describes strategies in general terms. A more specific and exemplifying description is provided by the teachers. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from the interview with Emma:

They [strategies, researcher's remark] are tricks, ways of moving forward, ways of solving the communication. If it is in oral or written communication, where the student produces something, then it is for example explaining if I can't think of a word and in

that way get around the problem. In written communication it's really the same thing. In regards to reading and listening, it's about practicing different ways of approaching and dealing with a listening- or reading comprehension. I don't think that all students are aware that there are different ways and especially in those cases there is a need for practicing that. And that is not done enough. (Interview Emma)

This excerpt has many correspondences to the above presented one (Skolverket, 2011b) in regards to what characteristics are assigned to learning strategies. Similar to the excerpt presented previously, Emma describes learning strategies as ways of solving problems, especially in communicative contexts. This excerpt exemplifies learning strategies for communicative purposes as ways of continuing the communication and rephrasing oneself if you get stuck on a word. These are strategies that can be directly traced back to specific strategies in the literature: the meta-SI strategy *managing the communication* (Oxford, 2011), and the SI strategy *overcoming knowledge gaps in communication* (Oxford, 2011) or as Oxford (1990) labels it, the compensation strategy *rephrasing*.

Emma highlights the need for teaching strategies, since the students are not always aware of the existence of different strategies. This would suggest that she, much like the excerpt from the commentary material (Skolverket, 2011b), has underlying ideas about the teach-ability and learnability of learning strategies (cf. discussion about strategy training above).

The excerpt from the interview with Emma also describes learning strategies for reading and listening in more detail. The teacher presents these as different ways of reading or listening to a text. These descriptions can be traced back to the specific strategies presented in the literature as the metacognitive strategies *identifying the purpose of a language task*, *planning for language task* (Oxford, 1990), *selective attention*, *advance organization*

(O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), and *planning for cognition* (Oxford, 2011). Depending on the type of text and the purpose of the reading or listening, the learner can plan for and choose different ways of assimilating the material. The following section presents other strategies for reading and listening that were found during the analysis in more detail.

***Language learning strategies for reading and listening.*** The different ways of reading or listening to a text that Emma refers to in the excerpt above are stated explicitly in the core content of the Swedish national syllabus for English 5: "Teaching in the course should cover the following core content: [...] Strategies for listening and reading in different ways and for different purposes [...]" (Skolverket, 2011a). This statement suggests that there are different ways of reading and listening to a text and that these should be treated in the teaching. Eva provides specific examples of this statement:

For reading and listening comprehension I actually think it's quite simple, but it has taken me a long time to figure out how I should help the students. For example, when we are reading I help the students learn that they don't need to understand every single word, but that sometimes you can understand a word you have never seen before with the help of the context and the entire sentence. To skim a text first and then read for detail. It's a bit more difficult for the listening comprehension, but that you can listen multiple times in real life, even though you can't do that during the national tests. To listen one time and try to come up with a sentence that describes what the text is about, and then you get confidence, you feel that you are able to do it. And then you listen again for specific details. [...] Those are the things that come to mind. I think it's rather fuzzy in the text [national syllabus, researcher's remark] in general, but this is the conclusion I have reached: to give the students the tools to understand when they really don't think that they know. (Interview Eva)



In this excerpt, Eva gives many examples of different strategies for reading and listening that are related to different ways of assimilating material. For example, as both the excerpt from the national syllabus (Skolverket, 2011a) and the excerpt from the interview with Eva suggest there are different techniques that can be used when reading a text. One technique is to skim the text. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), this is a metacognitive strategy called *advance organization*, while it is the cognitive strategy *conceptualizing broadly* according to Oxford (2011). Another way of reading a text is to read for detail, which is considered to be either a metacognitive strategy, *selective attention* (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), or cognitive strategy, *conceptualizing with details* (Oxford, 2011).

Similarly, there are different techniques for listening to a text. Eva suggests that you can listen to a text more than once. This could be considered to be a metacognitive strategy, since you plan for a language task (Oxford, 1990), depending on what the purpose of the language task is. During a first listening you can, for example, focus on understanding the main idea, which is a cognitive strategy according to Oxford (1990; 2011). During a second or third listening, you can instead listen for detail, much like when you read for detail. The focus on details when completing a listening task was used by the learners in Goh's (2002) study.

Eva also talks about the cognitive strategy *inferencing* (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2011), or as Oxford (1990) labels it, the compensation strategy *guessing*. This is when you use the entire context or sentence to guess the meaning of a word that you are not familiar with. As the study by Goh (2002) showed, this is a strategy that students use in listening comprehension tasks as well.

Eva states that the purpose of teaching learning strategies is: "[...] to give the students the tools to understand when they really don't think that they know" (Interview Eva). This suggests that by learning how to use learning strategies the students can gain confidence by

realizing that they can manage to understand the main idea of a text or to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Confidence as a strategy in itself is referred to as affective strategies by the existing literature in the field (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011) and includes actions such as encouraging yourself. Another teacher, Edith, gives another example of strategies for encouraging yourself. She says that by building on your previous knowledge about a certain topic you can encourage yourself with the idea that you understand what you read or what you listen to in the target language.

On the note of making use of students' previous knowledge, the teachers suggest that by preparing the students for the reading or listening, they can use their previous knowledge to help them understand. Focusing on general aspects, this could for example be done by brainstorming or discussing the topic with a peer. The students' linguistic knowledges could also be activated for example by introducing and discussing key words. These are strategies that in the existing literature are referred to as either metacognitive strategies where the learner links already known information to new material (Oxford, 1990) or cognitive strategies where knowledge is activated (Oxford, 2011).

The teachers exemplify several other strategies during the interviews. One is enhancing the amount of input, which is a metacognitive strategy (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011). Another is cooperating with peers, which is a social strategy (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011). The teachers also mention self-monitoring and self-evaluation as important strategies, which are metacognitive (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011).

***Language learning strategies for completing tests.*** During the teacher interviews, the participants also exemplified strategies that are specifically useful when taking tests:

Of course we use the national tests, but there's not much to say about that, they are what they are. Reading the questions first and practicing using pens and highlighters and taking notes when you are taking the test. We work a lot with question like "on the lines, between the lines, and beyond the lines". Beyond the lines are of course not part of the national tests, but they are useful for discussing texts and novels. On the lines are common, but between the lines is what you want to get at, being able to draw conclusions. (Interview Edith)

This excerpt from the interview with Edith illustrates both general and specific test-management strategies. Firstly, Edith proposes that students should read the questions first. That way they will understand what the purpose of the task is, which is referred to as a metacognitive strategy (Oxford, 1990; 2011). By reading the questions first, the student minimizes the risk of getting overly stressed because he needs to multitask, something that Eva underscores. This is considered a metacognitive strategy where the learner plans for the language task (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011).

Secondly, Edith mentions strategies such as highlighting and taking notes. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990), these are cognitive strategies. Oxford (2011) instead labels these as organizational strategies for cognition, which are thus metacognitive.

Lastly, Edith talks about the ability to read between the lines and draw conclusions from a text. These abilities could possibly be linked to the cognitive strategies *analyzing* and *reasoning* (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011).

Other test-taking strategies are mentioned by Emma:

Another strategy is to place yourself in the classroom in a way that makes you less disrupted by others, if you know that that makes you stressed. If you know that you have trouble hearing, sit in the middle of the classroom or close to a speaker. Learn to deal with it. (Interview Emma)

The excerpt demonstrates how students can manage stressful situations, by monitoring their feelings and planning for reducing stress in certain situations. These are strategies that in the literature within the field are referred to as meta-affective strategies (Oxford, 2011).

In the study conducted by Chou (2013), the results suggested that students rely more on test management strategies in a testing context. The excerpts above do imply that teachers treat some specific test-management strategies in their teaching. Elisa also notes that she gives her students the advice to never leave anything blank in a test, because a blank answer is always wrong. Another test-taking strategy is provided by Eva, who always advises her students to read the question carefully. This way, the students' will reach a better understanding of what the language task is about (cf. Oxford, 1990; 2011).

One learning strategy that is repeatedly mentioned in both the existing theoretical (e.g. Oxford, 1990) and empirical (e.g. Goh, 2002; Chou, 2013) literature is translation. In contrast, this strategy is only mentioned by one teacher (Elisa) and she states that she does not work with translations in English but only in her other subject. This would imply that the teachers do not teach translation as a strategy. Nonetheless, that does not inhibit the learners from possibly employing translation as a strategy themselves.

As we have seen in this section, the descriptions and definitions of learning strategies provided by the Swedish national syllabus for English and the participating teachers are, in most aspects, similar to the ones found in the existing theoretical and empirical research. The policy documents are more general in their descriptions of learning strategies, whereas the

teachers provide more specific examples of cognitive, metacognitive, affective, meta-affective, social and meta-SI strategies both for listening, reading, interacting, and taking tests. The most commonly occurring strategies in the teachers' accounts are cognitive and metacognitive.

In the next section, the parts of the analysis that are more specifically concerned with teaching, testing and assessment of learning strategies are presented.

**Interpreting policy documents for teaching, testing and assessment of language learning strategies.** As we have seen previously, one part of teaching English at high school-level in Sweden is connected to learning strategies for the receptive language skills, reading and listening. The teachers are also expected to test and assess students' use of learning strategies for reading and listening. In the following sections, the parts of the analysis that are concerned with these issues are presented.

*Teaching language learning strategies.* The teachers believe that learning strategies are an important part of the teaching. In the following excerpt, Edith gives her account of how she organizes the teaching of English in regards to this issue:

We listen a lot to 'Ted Talks' and I think that they are very good. Then you can stop after three minutes and ask which the main points were. So you ask them before to only listen for the main points or you can ask them to listen for what type of introduction the speaker did or what the purpose was, so you treat both speech and text. We work a lot with the structure of the speeches and what a typical news bulletin looks like. Then you know what to expect. Teaching different text types and genres. It is possible to do it with things that you listen to as well, but it is more difficult. If you emanate from strategies for reading, then it is easier to transfer those to strategies for listening. In the same way you transfer strategies for reading to strategies for writing,

they go hand in hand. Everything is intertwined: trying to find the line of thinking in someone else's text or speech and trying to create a line of thinking in your own text or speech, organizing your thoughts, and there are models for that. So to always give them models, in that way you can reach far. This works in most contexts, especially academic. Then you work with the introduction, the body, the conclusion, topic sentences, the thesis statement, the structure of paragraphs. [...] These are fantastic strategies and they are not difficult to teach. There is so much written about that type of scaffolding. Then you model their own texts. If they have a good reading ability, then the rest will fall into place. (Interview Edith)

This excerpt demonstrates that instead of focusing only on the linguistic aspects or the content of language, you can address issues regarding the form and structure of texts in the teaching. This can help the learners to predict the content and structure of texts or spoken language and furthermore, it can help the students in producing their own language, since they have a model to follow. These are abilities that are highly linked to the cognitive strategies of being able to recognize and use formulas and patterns (Oxford, 1990) and of being able to conceptualize broadly (Oxford, 2011), not only on a linguistic level, but also on a higher, structural level.

The excerpt also shows that strategies are viewed as being transferable. Edith stresses the fact that strategies for reading can be transferred to a listening context, and to a writing context. The idea of strategies as transferrable to other situations is somewhat divergent to, though not entirely refuted by, the results of Cohens' (2007) study, which indicated that researchers believe that strategies are dependent on the learner, the task and the environment.

Two of the teachers (Edith & Emma) remark that in the course English 7<sup>3</sup>, strategies have been a part of the teaching for a longer time than in the lower-level courses. The focus has mainly been on test-taking strategies in order to prepare the students for the Cambridge certificate or the IELTS. However, the teachers believe that the strategies are the same for all proficiency levels, as is shown in the excerpt below:

You must suppose that students have some strategies if they have gotten that far [English 7, researcher's remark], but that's not always the case. So in that level, it's very individual, whereas in English 5 most students need to learn if they are not super-good at it already. So that's the difference, I dedicate more time to it in English 5 and only do it for the students who really need it in the higher levels. But I don't think that the strategies are different. I think they are the same strategies. It's just if the students use them or not, I think. (Interview Eva)

This excerpt suggests that Eva believes that students of higher proficiency have more strategies than low-proficiency students. This is in correlation with definitions of language learning strategies (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) in that learning strategies can help the learners to understand and use information. It also corresponds to the results of Cohen's (2007) study in that language learning experts agree that strategies can help the learner to improve their language learning and language use. In contrast, the results of the study conducted by Oxford et al. (2004) suggested that low-proficiency learners use more strategies than high-proficiency learners. A possible explanation might be that high-proficiency learners can use strategies in a more appropriate way, and thus they do not need to employ as many strategies for the same language task or problem.

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<sup>3</sup> English 7 is the highest course of English taught at high school-level in Sweden. Normally, students take it in their final year.

*Testing and assessment of learners' use of language learning strategies.* Other than teaching language learning strategies, the Swedish national syllabus for English demands that teachers assess students' use of strategies. This is illustrated in the excerpt below, which is derived from the knowledge requirements for the course English 5:

Grade E [...] Students can choose and **with some certainty** use strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English [...] Grade C [...] Students can choose and **with some certainty** use strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English [...] Grade A [...] Students can choose and **with certainty** use strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English. (Skolverket, 2011a)

This excerpt proposes that there are strategies for understanding and evaluating the content of spoken and written English, that students can choose and use these strategies, and that students can use these strategies with different degrees of certainty. Furthermore, since this is a knowledge requirement, the excerpt above implicitly implies that teachers must grade, assess, and test students' use of strategies.

Both Edith and Emma express a wish that this should not be an individual knowledge requirement. Edith believes that learning strategies are a tool, much like grammar, which should not be graded separately since the ability use strategies will show in the skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) and thus be assessed through the other knowledge requirements. This could be supported by the idea of integrating strategy training in all teaching of the language through the strategic classroom (e.g. Coyle, 2007; Grenfell, 2007). Furthermore, Macaro's (2006) characteristics of learning strategies are very clear regarding them not being skills. By proposing to grade, test and assess students' use of learning strategies, the policy



documents are implying that strategies are skills, and thus contradicting important theories in the field.

Emma mainly addresses two other factors as the main issues of learning strategies being part of the knowledge requirements. Firstly, the interpretability of the gradual expressions “with some certainty” and “with certainty” poses a concern of equitable assessment that respects students’ educational rights. This is an issue that all teachers underscore, and Eva also stresses the issue that the knowledge requirement is exactly the same for grade E as for grade C.

Secondly, Emma feels that it is questionable whether or not it is possible to actually measure students’ use of strategies. This issue is reflected in the previous research within the field, where a number of different methods have been used for eliciting data of students’ use of strategies. The most commonly used method is the self-report questionnaire (e.g. Oxford et al., 2004). However, White, Schramm and Chamot (2007) argue for the combination of different qualitative methods.

The teacher interviews reveal some ideas of how testing of learners’ use of strategies could be executed:

It is during the teaching in the classroom that this shows and not during tests. I sit with them individually and I ask them to read the text and that way I can hear when they get stuck. Then I ask them questions like “what does that mean?”, “Did you understand?” and then I can see if they have used a strategy. You can also ask them “how did you know that?”, “what does that word mean?” and then they don’t know, but they can explain it from the rest of the context. [...] It’s the same thing for listening, you need to ask questions that show how much details the students have understood and if they

have managed to understand even though they don't understand every single word.

(Interview Eva)

What Eva describes in this excerpt is a form of verbal report. These have been used within learning strategy research (e.g. Goh, 2002). As Eva underlines, the main issue with this type of testing is that it is very demanding in terms of time. Similarly, Edith briefly mentions the possibility of asking students questions of the sort "what are your thoughts here?" in order to see what type of strategies the students use. However, she expresses concerns with the metalanguage that is required of students in order to discuss such matters.

Emma provides another idea of how testing of students' use of strategies could be carried out:

You could do some sort of evaluation. You put the students through a number of different strategies, both for listening and reading, and then the student gets to write some sort of diary or journal where he/she describes his/her development. Then it becomes some sort of process, working process. That could be useful. And then they would all reach grade A, because at the end they will all think that they can use strategies with certainty. And that needs to be the goal, that you want your students to be able to use strategies with certainty. (Interview Emma)

What Emma describes in the excerpt above is a type of reflective journal. This method has also previously been used in the field of research of language learning strategies (e.g. Halbach, 2000). The issue of the need for a metalanguage is also present in this type of testing, and furthermore there is no guarantee that the students would report on their actual use of learning strategies.

As we have seen above there are issues of another aspect of grading as well, namely the assessment of the degree of certainty with which the students can use strategies. The commentary material to the national syllabus provides a formulation of these gradual expressions:

The term **certainty** indicates how skilled the student is. In connection to strategies for assimilation, **with some certainty** implies that the student has a relatively good ability to use different ways of assimilating the content of spoken and written language and to evaluate the content or search for relevant information, structure it and evaluate the reliability of different sources. **With certainty** implies that the student masters the use of appropriate strategies well. (Skolverket, 2011b, translation mine)

This text explains that if a student has a relatively good ability to use different ways of assimilating the content of spoken and written language and to evaluate the content, then he or she can choose and **with some certainty** use strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English, which would correspond to the grade E and C for the course English 5. If a student masters the use of appropriate strategies well, then he or she can choose and **with certainty** use strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English, which would correspond to the grade A for the course English 5.

All of the teachers feel that it is difficult to interpret the formulations of this specific knowledge requirement. This is clearly illustrated in the excerpt below, which also exemplifies an important measure to take in order to reach a higher level of similarity between different teachers' interpretations of the knowledge requirements, namely, to cooperate and discuss with colleagues:

You could see it like this: that you can see how much they work with it. You can see if they really take in strategies or if they do it in a natural way without thinking about it. That is probably the difference between E, C, and A. On the E-level they really need to think “wait, how am I supposed to do in order to understand this sentence?”, so it takes some extra time. Whereas at A-level it happens automatically. [...] It is really difficult how you interpret the difference between “with some certainty” and “with certainty”, because it’s “with some certainty” both for E and C. It gets really confusing. The best thing you can do is to discuss with your colleagues and ask “How do you do it, what are your thoughts on this?” and try to do the same thing. But I think it gets wrong, since it becomes one interpretation for each individual, for each school, and within one school. It is really difficult, but that’s how I view it personally. If the students can do it easily and without me noticing it, then it’s an A. If it is more difficult and it shows clearly, then it’s E or C. That’s the best way I can think of.

(Interview Eva)

What the above excerpt suggests is that automatization of strategies is what differentiates a grade E or C from a grade A. Some of the existing literature does state that learning strategies can be made automatic (e.g. Oxford, 1990). An issue that arises with the idea of automatization of strategies is whether or not the supposedly automatic strategies are conscious or unconscious. In the previous section, we saw that the commentary material to the Swedish national syllabus state that learning strategies can be both conscious and unconscious. Consequently, this raises the highly motivated question: how can a teacher know how well a student is using a strategy, if the student himself is not aware of it? This issue is further underscored by the participating teachers, through the concern of how one can

measure students' use of strategies for listening and reading since they are most often not directly observable (cf. Oxford, 1990; Oxford, 2011; White, Schramm & Chamot, 2007).

As we have seen in this section, all of the teachers believe that learning strategies are an important part of language learning and teaching. The excerpt from the teacher interviews illustrate several examples of how one can work with learning strategies for listening and reading in English language teaching. However, concerns regarding the testing, assessment and grading of learning strategies for reading and listening are raised by the participating teachers. They find it difficult to perform a valid testing, due to the characteristics assigned to learning strategies, and the knowledge requirements are highly interpretable in their formulations despite the support from other policy documents. Nevertheless, a couple of examples of possible methods for testing and possible interpretations for assessment of learners' use of strategies for assimilating the content of spoken and written English are provided by the participating teachers.

### **Concluding Remarks, Limitations and Implications**

We will now return to the three research questions formulated initially. The first research question treated the presentation of the notion of learning strategies for the receptive language skills, reading and listening in the Swedish national syllabus for the course English 5 and related policy documents. The analysis of the policy documents show that the characteristics assigned to learning strategies are similar to those found in the existing literature. Learning strategies are described as goal-oriented actions (cf. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Macaro, 2006) that are mainly used for solving problems (cf. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Strategies are also ascribed a compensatory role when learners' knowledge lacks (cf. Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 2007), and they can be both conscious and unconscious (cf. Oxford, 1990; Macaro, 2006). Further, there are several different types of learning strategies (e.g. Oxford 2011) and they can be taught and learned (e.g. Oxford, 1990).

The second and third questions investigated how teachers of English interpret the formulations related to learning strategies for the receptive language skills found in the Swedish national syllabus for English 5, and what the practical implications of these formulations are, according to the teachers. The analysis of the teacher interviews show that all teachers believe that learning strategies are important, and they all imply that they include them in their teaching. The teachers exemplify specific strategies that are cognitive, metacognitive, affective, meta-affective, social, and meta-SI and they provide examples of how to work with them in the teaching. The most occurring strategies in the teachers' accounts are cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Further, the analysis of the teacher interviews indicates that there are issues regarding the testing, assessment and grading of learning strategies. The participants are uncertain of how testing should be conducted in a way that permits equitable assessment that respects students' educational rights, and how the gradual expressions "with some certainty" and "with certainty" should be interpreted. The characteristics that learning strategies are assigned with are also important factors that influence the ability to test and assess them as skills (cf. Macaro, 2006). Nonetheless, a couple of examples of how testing of learners' use of strategies for reading and listening could be conducted are provided by the teachers, as well as a possible interpretation of the knowledge requirements related to learning strategies for assimilating and evaluating the content of spoken and written English.

The present study has some limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, as Nunan (2012) underscores, in interviews there is an asymmetrical relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. For example, the interviewer often possesses a scientific language that the interviewee does not have (Seidman, 1998). By offering to conduct the interviews in both English and Swedish, by piloting the interview questions, and by trying to

establish rapport with the participants (Seidman, 1998), several precautions were taken in order to minimize the asymmetrical relationship.

Secondly, the translation of parts of the Swedish interviews into English might have affected the tone of these excerpts. Translation has tried to be done as precisely as possible, in order to preserve the main ideas and overall nature of the participants' responses. This seemed as the most appropriate solution, since not giving the participants' the choice of language for the interviews would probably have increased the asymmetrical relationship of the interviewer and the interviewee.

Finally, since the present study is a case study of qualitative and interpretative nature, the sample of participants is limited in number. Therefore, the results of the present study are not generalizable to a larger population and it is difficult to determine similarities and divergences between the different participants' accounts and interpretations of the policy documents.

This last issue is one that needs to be considered in future studies. Documenting teachers' best practices is an important measure to take in order to improve teaching, testing and assessment, since it provides in-service and pre-service teachers with inspiration and ideas of how to work, both in general and regarding such specific issues as the one addressed in the present study. By relying on a larger sample of participating teachers, future studies could expand on and reinforce results found in previous studies such as the present one. Another possible development for future research is to include classroom observations as a way of documenting teaching and teachers' actual implementation of policy documents.

Future studies that are specifically directed towards learning strategies in English language teaching should focus on the consciousness and observability of these. This is an issue that the participating teachers in the present study underscore. How should testing, assessment, and grading of learners' use of strategies be conducted if language learning

strategies can be unconscious and unobservable? This is a problem that needs to be addressed and investigated in future research, possibly by evaluating the efficiency of different methods for measuring learners' use of strategies.

In conclusion, the purpose of the present study was to document English language teachers' best practices regarding what in the Swedish national syllabus for English for high school is referred to as "[...] strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English" (Skolverket, 2011a). Four teachers were chosen for this study and their interpretations of the Swedish national syllabus for English and other policy documents, as well as their accounts of English language teaching were documented through interviews. These were analyzed and discussed in relation to the policy documents and existing literature in the field. The analysis provides some ideas and inspiration for how to work with, test and assess language learning strategies for reading and listening. However, the results of this study suggest that there is still work that needs to be done in order to ensure equitable assessment that respects students' educational rights regarding this specific knowledge requirement. It appears as though the current policy documents would need to be reviewed and possibly revised in terms of how the knowledge requirement for learning strategies is formulated, since it seems to be promoting too much space for interpretations. Until then, more research and studies documenting teachers' best practices must be made.

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## Appendix A -Interview Manuscript

Interview in English or in Swedish

Introduce myself

Introduce the project

Informed consent to participate in the study

Anonymity

Participant's right to stop the interview at any time

Participant's right to review the report before publication

Consent to recording the interview

Approximate length of the interview

You are welcome to ask questions

Place:

Time:

### Basic information

Name:

Teaching courses in English & programs:

Other subjects:

Number of years teaching:

Mother tongue:

Learning strategies are present in the national syllabus for English 5, in both the aim of the subject, the core content and the knowledge requirements. In the aim of the subject it is stated that "In addition, students should be given the opportunity to develop their ability to use different strategies to support communication and to solve problems when language skills are inadequate" (Skolverket, 2011a).

1. How would you describe learning strategies?

This study is specifically focused on learning strategies for the receptive language skills. In the core content for English 5, in the section called "reception", it is stated that: "Teaching in the course should cover the following core content: [...] Strategies for listening and reading in different ways and for different purposes" (Skolverket, 2011a).

2. How do you interpret this statement?

a) Could you give examples of learning strategies for listening?

b) Could you give examples or learning strategies for reading?

3. How does this statement affect your teaching of English?

One of the knowledge requirements for the course English 5 is related to strategies for listening and reading. It states for grade E and C that: “Students can choose and *with some certainty* use strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English” (Skolverket, 2011a) and for grade A that “Students can choose and *with certainty* use strategies to assimilate and evaluate the content of spoken and written English” (Skolverket, 2011a).

4. How would you assess students’ knowledge in relation to this knowledge requirement?

5. What type of tests or assignments would you use to assess students’ knowledge in relation to this knowledge requirement?

6. How would you interpret the difference between the gradual expressions **with some certainty** and **with certainty** in this particular knowledge requirement?

7. If you teach another course of English, is there a difference in how you work with learning strategies in the teaching of the different courses?

8. If you teach another language, is there a difference in how you work with learning strategies in the teaching of the different languages?

9. Have you had any formal training regarding learning strategies?

10. Do you want to add anything? Do you have any questions? Final comments?

## Appendix B -Intervjuguide

Intervju på Engelska eller svenska

Presentera mig själv

Presentera projektet

Medgivande att delta i studien

Anonymitet

Deltagarens rätt att avbryta intervjun när som helst

Deltagarens rätt att läsa igenom rapporten innan publicering

Medgivande att spela in intervjun

Ungefärlig längd för intervjun

Ställ gärna frågor

Plats:

Tid:

Grundläggande information

Namn:

Undervisar kurser i Engelska & program:

Andra ämnen:

Antal år i läraryrket:

Modersmål:

Elevstrategier finns presenterade i kursplanen för Engelska 5, både i ämnets syfte, centralt innehåll och kunskapskraven. I ämnets syfte står det att ”Dessutom ska eleverna ges möjlighet att utveckla förmåga att använda olika strategier för att stödja kommunikationen och för att lösa problem när språkkunskaperna inte räcker till” (Skolverket, 2011a).

1. Hur skulle du beskriva elevstrategier?

Denna studie fokuserar särskilt på elevstrategier för de receptiva språkfärdigheterna. I det centrala innehållet för Engelska 5, under reception, står det att: ”*Undervisningen i kursen ska behandla följande centrala innehåll: [...] Strategier för att lyssna och läsa på olika sätt och med olika syften*” (Skolverket, 2011a).

2. Hur tolkar du denna formulering?

a) skulle du kunna ge exempel på elevstrategier för lyssnande?

b) skulle du kunna ge exempel på elevstrategier för läsning?

3. Hur påverkar denna formulering din undervisning?

Ett av kunskapskraven för Engelska 5 har att göra med strategier vid lyssnande och läsning. Det står för betyg E och C att: "Eleven kan välja och *med viss säkerhet* använda strategier för att tillgodogöra sig och kritiskt granska innehållet i talad och skriven engelska" (Skolverket, 2011a) och för betyg A att: "Eleven kan välja och *med säkerhet* använda strategier för att tillgodogöra sig och kritiskt granska innehållet i talad och skriven engelska" (Skolverket, 2011a).

4. Hur skulle du bedöma elevers kunskap i förhållande till detta kunskapskrav?

5. Vilken typ av test eller uppgift skulle du använda dig av för att bedöma elevers kunskap i förhållande till detta kunskapskrav?

6. Hur skulle du tolka skillnaden mellan graduttrycken **med viss säkerhet** och **med säkerhet** i detta specifika kunskapskrav?

7. Om du undervisar en annan kurs i engelska, finns det någon skillnad i hur du arbetar med elevstrategier i undervisningen av de olika kurserna?

8. Om du undervisar ett annat språk, finns det någon skillnad i hur du arbetar med elevstrategier i undervisningen av de olika språken?

9. Har du fått någon utbildning i elevstrategier?

10. Vill du tillägga något? Har du några frågor? Avslutande kommentarer?