

Mind the Gap: A Case Study on the Preparedness of EFL Students at a University in Sweden.



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Abstract

Many students struggle when transitioning from upper secondary school to higher education. While there is a substantial amount of research regarding the difference in education from isolated perspectives, little research has investigated the connection between different perspectives. This paper studies the relation between language competencies and language learning strategies within the EFL context. The purpose of this study is to investigate the difference between studies of English at upper secondary (or equivalent) and university level. This is realized through two research questions: (1) In what ways do university students feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies? and (2) In what ways do they not feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies? The study is guided by a theoretical framework consisting of a combination of self-concept and language learning strategies. The population of the study consisted of English teacher candidates as well as students enrolled in an English course. The findings show that the students feel prepared to study English in terms of language proficiency, but less prepared in terms of language learning strategies. Items regarding time-management received an especially low result. The results indicate that the students need more training in applying learning strategies earlier in their studies.

Keywords: self-concept, learning strategies, learner preparedness, EFL

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Mind the Gap: A Case Study on the Preparedness of Students Enrolled in an English
Studies Course at a University in Sweden.

Introduction

The transition from upper secondary school to university studies can often be a challenging process. While university preparatory programs are designed to ease the transition between two school systems, the focus of these programs are more often focused towards teaching academic skills, rather than fostering autonomous learning individuals. Foster (2002) examined the Germanic school system and found that new students tend to be unprepared for the level of autonomy required to complete their studies. Similarly, Brady and Allingham (2005) concluded that learner autonomy was the common denominator to predict academic success in higher studies, more than that of academic skills.

A significant amount of research has been carried out in order to map the learner preparedness of university students. However, the previously conducted studies have examined academic skills or learning strategies in isolation. Few studies have explored academic skills in comparison with learning strategies. Therefore, this paper will try to add to the existing field of knowledge by examining the intersecting space between English language studies and learning strategies. The aim of the research, then, is to investigate the difference between studies of English in upper secondary school (or equivalent) and in higher education. This will be operationalized by examining the perceived preparedness with respect to language proficiency and language learning strategies among students of English at Lund University. By studying the two areas of interest in relation to each other, I hope to contribute to some new insights on the phenomena.

The paper is divided into 7 chapters: *Previously Conducted Research, Theoretical Framework, Method, Results, Discussion and Conclusion*. The first chapter, *Previously*

Conducted Research, describes the existing field of knowledge with regards to English language competencies and learning strategies. The second chapter, *Theoretical Framework*, outlines the theories underpinning this study. The third chapter, *Method*, covers the methodological decisions made when designing the study. The *Results* section describes the data gathered in study. The subsequent chapter, *Discussion*, contains the interpretation and discussion of the results. The paper ends with the *conclusion*, which entails a short summary as well as future research directions and teaching implications for teachers of English.

The study will be guided by two research questions:

- I. In what ways do university students feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies?
- II. In what ways do they not feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies?

Previously Conducted Research

This section will describe the previously conducted research examining the transitional problems of new students in higher education. The section is divided in three sub-categories: *English Language Proficiency*, *Gaps in Terms of Learning Strategies* and *Gaps in Terms of Institutional Practices*. The first sub-category, *English Language Proficiency*, describes the research conducted regarding English language proficiency in the Swedish context. The second sub-category, *Gaps in Terms of Learning Strategies*, describes the principle learning strategies believed to cause problems in the transition to university studies. The third and final subcategory, *Gaps in Terms of Institutional Practices*, describes the transitional research viewed from the institutional point of view.

English Language Proficiency

Little research has been carried out in order to map the overall English language proficiency of Swedish students in relation to a global criterion-based framework. The European Commission (2012) conducted a large study surveying the foreign language proficiency of students in the secondary education in 16 countries across the world. The survey, also known as *The European Survey on Language Competences* (ESCL), measured the EFL knowledge of 54,000 students. The language competencies measured were the abilities to read, listen, and write. The results showed that the 15-year-old Swedish students of 2011, have the highest results regarding their English language competencies. Over 80% of the Swedish students scored an equivalent of B1 or higher in the CEFR-scale. Assuming some progression is made throughout the upper secondary education, Swedish students are well prepared to engage in studies of English.

Gaps in Terms of Learning Strategies

While academic skills, such as language competencies, are vital in transitioning to a higher form of education, a proper set of learning strategies is also needed to efficiently master the new ground of knowledge. One of the most prevalent themes within the current field of research on learning strategies refers to *deep* and *surface* learning. Deep and surface learning can be described as two different approaches to studying in terms of overarching goals and performance (Nonis & Hudson, 2010; Taylor & Drury, 2005; Hultberg, Plos, Hendry & Kjellgren, 2008). While deep learners seek to understand the subject matter, surface learners simply aspire to meet the course demands, often by the means of reproduction. Gan, Humphreys and Hamp-Lyons (2004) argue that there is a strong link between academic success and deep learning strategies. They found a strong correlation between students' achievement in an ESL-course and reported degree of deep learning strategies. This claim is supported by another study conducted by Harklau (2001), where

successful students reported a higher amount of deep learning strategies. Even though deep learning can be inferred to be one of the most salient features in successful academic studies, surface learning strategies keeps reappearing among new students. Appleman and Green (1993) believe that this phenomenon can be ascribed to teachers' tendency to focus on product rather than on process. This thesis is supported by McNamara, Morton, Storch and Tomphson (2018, p. 21), who could see a change in students' behavior towards the end of the first university year when focusing on working with the writing process. Although there is an apparent advantage in using efficient learning strategies, a student also needs the ability to monitor and regulate their approaches to learning.

A student's ability to monitor and regulate their approaches learning is highly related to their *locus of control*. The locus of control can be described as the students' perception of themselves as being responsible for the outcome of the learning situation. Harklau (2001, p. 53) argues that there is a strong link between students' academic achievement and their perceived role as agents of learning. Correspondingly, Gan et al. (2004) found that the successful students in their study tended to attribute their success to controllable abilities such as effort and planning, while the unsuccessful students would attribute their failure to external, uncontrollable circumstances, such as uninspiring lecturers. An OECD report called *Improving Schools in Sweden: An OECD Perspective* (2015) concludes that the tendency to reject responsibility for the leaning outcome is especially true for Swedish students:

PISA shows that perseverance is strongly correlated with student performance, and even more so in Sweden than in most other countries. This and other evidence leads to the conclusion that Swedish students are not always putting in the necessary effort (NAE, 2013). The relatively low perseverance and students' frequent belief that their underperformance is caused by something other than their own lack of effort. (p. 37)

While the students' locus of control can be described as the relationship between student effort and their approaches to studies, learner autonomy can be described as the students' ability to take responsibility for their learning. Foster (2002) conducted a study that aimed to investigate the learning gaps in university writing and the lack of scaffolding in the same area. He found, among other things, that the students had a hard time adjusting to the autonomy needed in order to carry out studies in higher education. In other words, the students struggled to take control of their learning. Similarly, Brady and Allingham (2005) researched the implications of an extra upper secondary school year with regards to college education. Their findings imply a consistent relationship between learner autonomy and academic success regardless of 12 or 13 years in the previous school systems.

Learner autonomy is also related to students' ability to manage their time. Alghamdi (2016, p. 65) suggests that the amount of time spent studying can be predictor of academic success. This is in accordance with several previous studies that shows a positive relation between study time and academic achievement (Michaels & Miethe, 1989; Nonis & Hudson, 2010). However, other studies imply less of a positive relationship between study time, planning and academic accomplishment. Nonis and Hudson (2010) tried to verify the supposed relationship between study time and academic performance. Their research suggests an insignificantly small relationship between study time and academic success. While their study could not prove Alghamdis (2016) thesis, they did find a negative relationship between the division of work, study and free time. The amount of time spent at work will, according to their findings, have a negative effect on the students' academic performance.

Holdaway and Kelloway (1987) conducted a study where they measured the perceptions of new students enrolled in different courses in a university in Canada. Their study found that the students perceived themselves as spending most of their free time engaged in study activities. According to Holdaway and Kelloway (ibid.), the students

explained this behavior as a product of having an increased workload following their upper secondary studies. This explanation is reiterated by students in a study by Soiferman (2012). The students in Soiferman's study concluded that they did not have the proper tools to assess the time required to complete assignments. This led to unintentional bad time-management, also known as *cramming*¹. Foster (2002) believes that students' tendency to not being able to properly plan their studies stems from the exhaustive schedules of upper secondary education. Many new students come from school systems that have daily schedules that stretches from morning to afternoon. When transitioning to higher education, the perceived amount of free time become a common pitfall among new students (ibid.). Students participating in the study conducted by Foster (ibid.) reportedly viewed gaps in the schedule as free time. He deduces that this is the result of having all the school hours scheduled in the upper secondary level. This creates a custom for when and where studying should take place (i.e. within the classroom).

Gaps in Terms of Institutional Strategies

Whereas many studies have surveyed the learning profiles of students, some research has tried to look at learning profiles within faculties and departments. According to Rantanen (1989), there is an ongoing problem regarding different study cultures within different faculties. According to Rantanen (ibid.), the delicate relation between study cultures and faculties become especially evident when students move across departments within their academic education(s). Shay and Moore (2002) researched the relationship between the curriculum and university students' roles as writers. The study found that the students previous experiences within the academic world had constructed a writing identity that conflicted with other departments within the university. While the linguistic department (and its curriculum) had facilitated one type of study culture, the history department had

¹ As described by Michaels & Miethe, 1989

encouraged another. The history students tended to use much more of their own beliefs in their writing, as this was the tradition in the history department. When performing academic writing in the linguistic department, another type of approach was desired. In order to work around this clash of titans, Shay and Moore (2002, p. 309) suggest foregrounding disciplinary roles to new students when designing and administering tasks. Moreover, other study cultures can be scaffolded in a similar way in order to ease the transition to higher education (Rantanen, 1989; Shay & Moore, 2002; Brady & Allingham, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

This section will describe the theoretical framework underpinning this study. The section is divided into two subcategories: one for each theory. The first subcategory, *Academic Self-Concept and Achievement*, describes psychological theory of self-concept with regards to English as a foreign language. This theory helps guide how to understand and validate the results of this study. The second sub-category, *Learning Strategies in Language Acquisition*, describes a theory regarding language learning strategies, and this theory is used to design and interpret the results of the study.

Academic Self-Concept and Achievement

Self-concept is a psychological theory that describes the process of identity-formation through the means of different concepts (Ferla, Valcke & Yonghong, 2009; Song & Hattie, 1985; Mercer, 2011; Epstein, 1973). According to the theory of self-concept, a person's identity is comprised of a collection of concepts relating to different domains in a person's life. Mercer (2011) describes self-concept as "[...] the beliefs one has about one's self, one's self perception" (p. 14). Self-concept, then, can be understood as a collection of different hierarchical identities that belong to different areas of a person's reality. One such domain is called *academic self-concept*. Academic self-concept refers to an individual's perception of themselves in the academic context. The academic context is essentially a domain where the

person is performing towards achievement. Song and Hattie (1985, p. 366) define the academic self-concept as a category entailing several sub-categories: *Classroom self-concept*, *Ability self-concept*, and *Achievement self-concept*. In the traditional view of self-concept, language is believed to be a sub-category of both ability self-concept and achievement self-concept (see Figure 1 below).

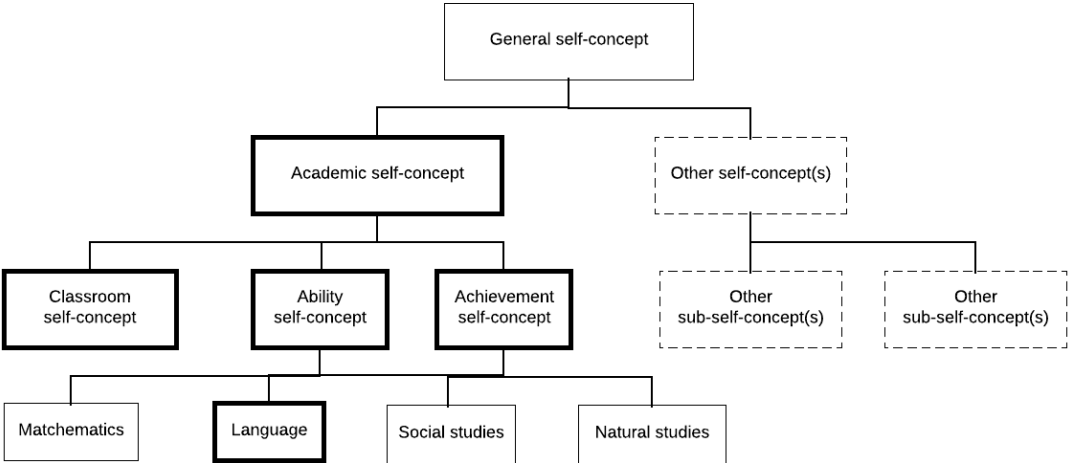


Figure 1: Model of academic self-concept

Mercer (2011) believes that a person has several different language self-concepts corresponding to the different languages the person knows. According to this elaborated understanding of self-concept, a person has got a different self-concept regarding their second or foreign language, as opposed to their self-concept regarding their first language. Further, Mercer (2011) argues that there can be self-concepts within the different language domains. This would mean that a person can have an *English as a foreign language writing self-concept*.

The theory on self-concept becomes especially interesting for this study when looking at the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement. Several studies (Mercer, 2011; Ferla, Valcke & Yonghong, 2009; Song & Hattie, 2003) point towards a strong relation

between academic self-concept and actual academic achievement. In fact, the more specific of a construct measured through the means of self-concept, the more likely it is to correspond with the person's achievement level (Song & Hattie, 2003). This means that the reported EFL self-concept, such as writing EFL self-concept, most likely is a valid measurement of the person's actual abilities.

Learning Strategies in Language Acquisition

While the different constructs² within the different language self-concepts can be used to measure a person's language proficiency, they do not provide a complete picture of a person's ability to function in a learning environment. In order to master a subject efficiently, the learner needs to have *learning strategies* in place. Chamot and O'Malley (1987) studied the different learning strategies among several groups of EFL-students and proposed three over-arching categories to fully capture the different groups of strategies used by language learners³:

- **Metacognitive strategies:** These types of strategies involve planning for learning, organizing the learning, and evaluating one's learning. For example: Outlining goals for study time, planning for studies, and evaluating the success of a learning activity.
- **Cognitive strategies:** These types of strategies include interaction with material by different means or relating existing material with new material. For example: Using dictionaries, taking notes, summarizing and elaborating.
- **Social-affective strategies:** These types of strategies involve interaction with other persons. For example: Asking questions for clarification, working with peers, and getting feedback.

² Such as writing, reading, speaking and listening

³ Examples retrieved from the list: *Learning Strategy Definitions* (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987)

Method

This section will describe the research design of the present study. The study is guided by two research questions, as previously mentioned: (1) *In what ways do university students feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies?* and (2) *In what ways do they not feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies?* As the research questions investigate the difference between studies of English at upper secondary school and in higher education from the perspective of the students, the study mainly follows the tradition of the qualitative approach. Nunan (1992) argues that the dichotomous division between qualitative and quantitative tradition is too strict and that a more flexible approach to the research traditions should be used. Using this, more flexible, description, the research tradition of this study can be viewed as *exploratory-qualitative-statistical* (Nunan, 1992, p. 6).

As the study aims to investigate the difference in education within a certain context, a case study research design was chosen. Duff (2012) argues that the case study research design is viewed differently in different fields of research. However, the case study usually studies a phenomenon from a certain perspective, in-depth, and in a triangulating manner. While this study does not triangulate the phenomena by using multiple data sources, it aims to investigate the research problem isolated to one university in Sweden. Additionally, the case study research design caters to a mixed methods approach (Nunan, 1992, p.74).

Participants and Context

The participants in this study consisted of two different sample populations. The first set of participants were 68 students enrolled in the *English Teacher Education Program* at Lund University. The second set of participants consisted of 141 students that were enrolled in a free-standing English course offered by the linguistic department at Lund University. 35 out of the 209 students responded to the survey. 77.1% of the respondents were female. The

mean average years between their upper secondary studies and enrollment in the English course was 2.75 years, while the median was 2 years.

As mentioned above, the study took place at Lund university in southern Sweden. Lund university was especially interesting to investigate because of two primary reasons. First and foremost, Lund university is ranked among the top universities in the world: their linguistics department is ranked in the top 100 (Lund University, 2018). This means that the Lund university English department, where the English education takes place, can be viewed as of notably high quality. Secondly, Lund university has a relatively new Teacher Education Program, which has been reworked as of 2016. For the English teacher candidates, the reorganization entailed putting the students geographically closer to the linguistics department. This means that the two groups of populations had a very similar environmental context.

Study Instrument and Data Collection

The data in this study were collected through the means of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed using the theoretical framework as well as the reviewed literature. The purpose of the questionnaire was two-fold. The first aim was to measure the perceived preparedness to study English amongst students at Lund University. Because of the abstract nature of the term of preparedness, an operationalization diagram was created to map the different variables of the concept (see Figure 2). The operationalization resulted in 4 distinct categories: *The language components of the EFL Self-concept*, *Meta-cognitive strategies*, *Cognitive strategies*, and *Social-affective strategies*.

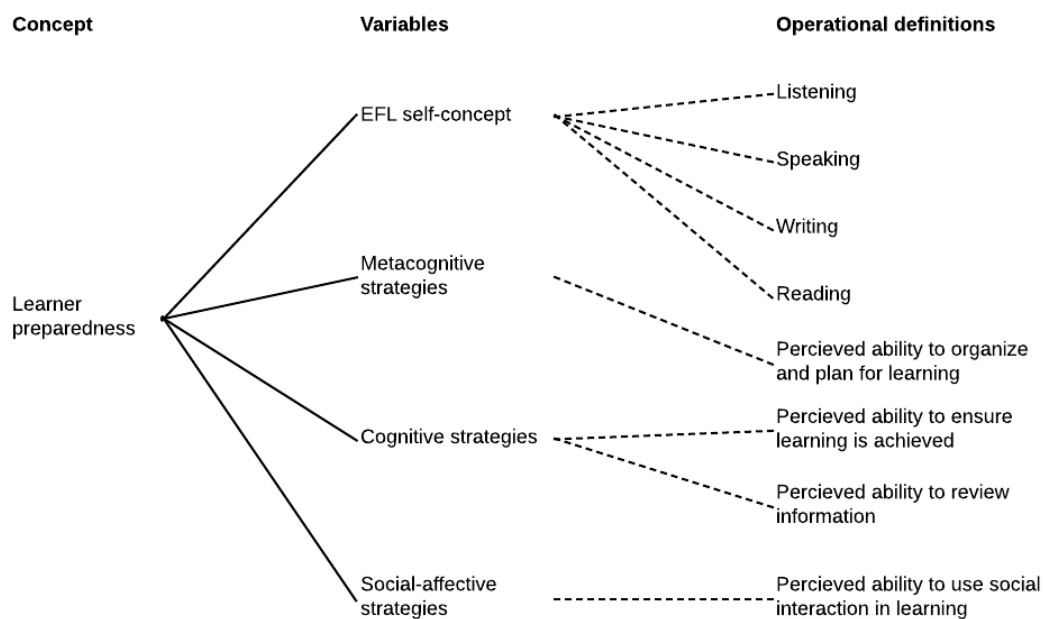


Figure 2: Operationalization diagram of 'Learner preparedness'

The categories were then further divided into smaller components. In order to measure the students' perceived preparedness in terms of language proficiency, 13 questionnaire items regarding language proficiency skills were developed using *the CEFR-framework, the university English course curriculum and the upper secondary English 6 curriculum*. In order to measure the participants' learner strategies, 14 questionnaire items were created using the *Learner Strategy Definitions* suggested by Chamot and O'Malley (1987). While the list provides a large spectrum of different strategies, only a select few were chosen to measure the overarching variables, as to not induce respondent fatigue. The total of 27 items were scored on a 6-point scale where the respondents had to rate their preparedness in relation to the English course. The scale was ranged as follows: 1=Very unprepared, 2=Unprepared, 3=Somewhat unprepared, 4=Somewhat prepared, 5=Prepared, 6=Very prepared.

The second aim of the questionnaire was to measure the students' approaches to their performance in relation to their reported learner preparedness. This was done by asking the respondents to choose the three most important features to aid their studies. The question consisted of 14 items relating to previous constructs, as well as a few new ones. The items had a clear relation to internal and external locus of responsibility. The survey also consisted of an open-ended question where the respondents were asked to answer what had surprised them the most in going from upper secondary to higher education.

The survey was created digitally using Sunet Survey and the participants were invited to participate via an e-mail explaining the purpose of the study and the implications of participating. Before the invitation was sent out, the questionnaire was piloted on a group of students similar to the target population. Moreover, an upper-secondary teacher looked at the questions as to ensure no items were overlooked. The questionnaire was open for 16 days and three reminders were sent out in order to ensure as high a response rate as possible.

Data Analysis and Coding

The statistical data was analyzed using the statistical software SPSS. The analysis consisted of two viewpoints. The first viewpoint entailed looking at the groups as one entity. The data were analyzed using frequency statistics, discerning the percental variability within each item. In the item sets measuring preparedness, the mean average and SD (*Standard Deviation*) was calculated in order to get a comparable measure across variables. The second viewpoint meant comparing the mean average of the two groups. This was achieved by doing an *Independent-Samples T-Test*. The Independent-Samples-T-Test can be explained as a test measuring the mean of a set of dependent variables against two independent variables. This allows for a mean average comparison between two sub-populations. The internal distribution within the items was not computed for the sub-groups.

Because of the nature of the data gathered from the open-ended question, the results from this item could not be analyzed statistically. Instead, it was coded inductively to find patterns within the data. The approach was inspired by the *Descriptive Coding Method* as explained by Saldaña (2015, p. 102). This approach entails coding a set of data inductively; searching for patterns within the data, rather than using an external framework. The responses to the open-ended questions were tagged with different topics, such as *workload*. If a response contained more than one topic, the other topic(s) were tagged as well. One response could therefore count as more than one instance of a theme. While this approach usually involves several stages of coding, only two stages were necessary in this study as the data were so limited in size. The frequency of each topic was measured and compiled. Topics that did not appear more than once or twice were discarded.

Limitations

Although a lot of thought has gone into the research design, there were some limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The first set of issues concerns the population of the study. The response rate; that is, the number of respondents who chose to participate, was approximately 17%. The high number of non-responders leaves room for a potential error called *non-response bias*. Non-response bias occurs when a high number of prospective participants, for some reason, does not participate in the survey (Fowler, 2012, p.49-56). The reasoning behind the bias is that the responding population may be systematically different from the nonresponding one. Another issue regarding the population is the distribution among gender; as the respondents in the present survey mainly were female. The second set of issues concerns the lack of triangulation. The lack of triangulation makes the data yielded from the less reliable and valid.

Results

This section entails the results of the study. The results are organized thematically and is presented in three sub-sections: *Preparedness in Terms of Language Proficiency*, *Preparedness in Terms of Learning Strategies*, and *Approaches to Studies*. The first section provides the results of the items measuring preparedness in terms of language proficiency. The second part provides the results of the items measuring preparedness in terms of learner strategies. The third section provides the results of the items measuring the respondents approaches to their studies.

Preparedness in Terms of Language Proficiency

Table 1: Reported preparedness in terms of language proficiency

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
Overall language proficiency preparedness	5.1	1.0
Preparedness writing: Grammar	4.7	1.0
Preparedness writing: Reference system	4.2	1.2
Preparedness writing: Genre	4.4	1.1
Preparedness writing: Process	4.2	1.3
Preparedness reading: Comprehension	4.9	0.9
Preparedness reading: Speed	4.0	1.4
Preparedness reading: Evaluating	4.7	1.1
Preparedness speaking: Formulating thoughts	5.1	1.1
Preparedness speaking: Fluency	5.0	1.0
Preparedness speaking: Anxiety	4.5	1.2
Preparedness speaking: Discussion	5.0	1.2
Preparedness listening: Comprehension	5.3	0.9
Preparedness listening: Focus	5.3	0.7

The results show that the respondents perceive themselves as having an overall high preparedness in terms of language abilities. When asked to rate their overall language proficiency, the respondents reported a very high level of preparedness. This is, however, not fully reflected in the different items measuring the different key aspects of language proficiency. Only three items mirror or surpasses the overall language preparedness rating: *Formulating thoughts when speaking*, *listening comprehension* and *listening focus*. In other

words, the respondents reported themselves as more prepared on the whole as opposed to their reported preparedness in the sub-parts of language proficiency operationalized in the survey.⁴

26 of the 35 respondents reported a higher preparedness in the item measuring overall language proficiency preparedness versus the items measuring the different aspects of language proficiency.

While the respondents perceive themselves as well prepared in many of the language aspects, some items yielded a slightly weaker result. With a mean average of 4.0, *reading speed* yielded the lowest score among all language proficiency items. The standard deviation within this item was, additionally, the highest in the item set. This means that there was a significant spread amongst the responses within that item. Although reading speed received the lowest score coupled with a high spread, the item regarding *reading comprehension* received a significantly higher score with a greater agreement amongst the responses. Two other items yielded quite low results compared to the other language proficiency items. The ability to use *reference systems* as well as using the *writing process* yielded a mean average of 4.2 each.

When measuring the difference between the two groups of population, no significant pattern emerged. However, there were some differences that are worth mentioning. The group consisting of teacher program candidates consistently reported a higher amount of preparedness regarding speaking abilities. The mean average of the 4 items measuring speaking proficiency varied between 0,69 and 0,87 higher amongst English teacher candidates in comparison with the mean average of the other group.

⁴ The mean of all of the scores is 4.7 as opposed to 5.1 reported. The respondents reported an average of -0.4 deviation from their perceived overall language preparedness to study English.

Preparedness in Terms of Learning Strategies

Compared to the language proficiency items, the respondents reported a generally lower degree of preparedness in the items measuring learning strategies. Strategies involving planning and organizing studies; that is, meta-cognitive strategies, received the lowest overall mean score in the survey. However, the results show an inconsistent relation within the item set. While the respondents reported a low preparedness to manage and organize the time spent studying, they reported a very high preparedness in meeting deadlines. In fact, *avoiding procrastination* had the lowest mean rating of 3.2, which can be compared with mean rating of 4.9 in the item measuring preparedness to meet deadlines. All items measuring time management⁵ received a generally low mean average with high spread within the items. Unsurprisingly, the respondents reported a very high preparedness in *attending class regularly*.

Table 2: Perceived ability to use meta-cognitive strategies

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
Avoiding procrastination	3.2	1.4
Reading prior to lectures	4.2	1.2
Allocating time to read texts	3.9	1.3
Outlining goals for study time	3.7	1.5
Attending class regularly	5.5	0.7
Beginning assignments well in advance	3.9	1.3
Scheduling time for studies	3.9	1.5
Keeping deadlines	4.9	1.1

As opposed to the items measuring meta-cognitive strategies, the items measuring cognitive and social-affective strategies yielded more linear results. As can be seen in table 3, the respondents graded themselves as prepared regarding all four items measuring cognitive strategies. That is, strategies involving actions such as note-taking, cross-referencing, and summarizing of information. The only item with slight more noticeable internal variety is the

⁵ Avoiding procrastination; Allocating time to read texts; Outlining goals for study time; Beginning assignments well in advance; Scheduling time for studie

item regarding *Taking notes when reading* with its standard deviation of 1.5. The item measuring learning strategies as social interactions, social-affective strategies, received a slightly lower result than the cognitive strategies (see table 3).

Table 3: Perceived preparedness to use cognitive strategies

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
Looking up unfamiliar words	4.7	1.0
Taking notes when reading	4.7	1.5
Taking notes during lectures	4.8	1.3
Avoiding plagiarism when writing	4.6	1.2

Table 4: Perceived ability to use social-affective strategies

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>
Asking questions	4.3	1.2

There was just a slight difference between the two groups of respondents regarding their perceived preparedness to use learning strategies. The English teacher candidates rated themselves as less prepared in the item measuring meta-cognitive abilities. Furthermore, with a mean rating difference of 1.1, the English teacher candidates reported a significantly lower degree of preparedness to avoid plagiarism.

Approaches to Studies

The respondents were also asked to rank the three items that would have aided them the most in their studies. 42.2% of the respondents chose the item *More explicitness from lecturers regarding expectations for you as a student*. This is closely followed by the items *Clearer instructions from university lecturers* and *Better reading speed* with 32.4% each. The two items with the lowest score were *Better reading comprehension* and *Better control of pronunciation when speaking*, which aligns with the results of the language proficiency items. 8.6% of the respondents answered, by the use of a free-text option, that they wanted more knowledge about the reference system.

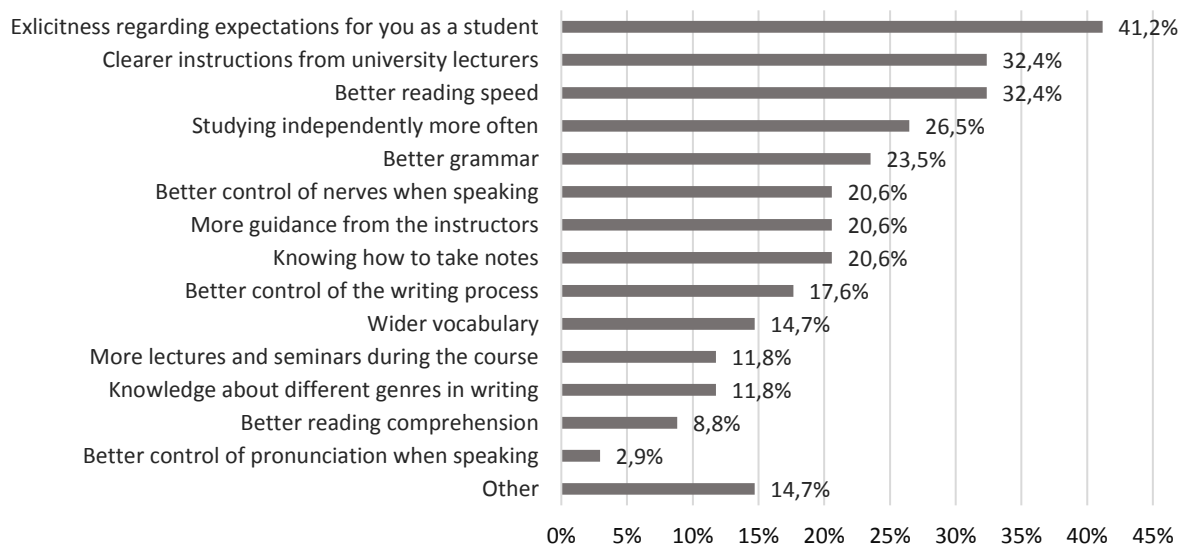


Figure 3: What would have aided the respondents most in their studies

The results from the open-ended question about what had surprised the respondents the most in going from upper secondary English studies to university English studies, show that there are several areas in higher studies that the respondents did not anticipate. Four strong themes emerged from the data: *workload*, *student independency*, *course intensity*, and *depth of knowledge*. Course intensity and depth of knowledge were the most frequent categories reported by the respondents. Course intensity includes responses that refers to course speed and studying several sub courses parallely. Several respondents seem to have expected another type of study culture than what was present. For example, one respondent wrote:

[My translation] The tempo! Was prepared to be able to focus on one thing at the time in my university studies, not like we have had it up until this point with several sub courses at the same time.

The other frequent theme, depth of knowledge, refers to responses about the level of knowledge covered in the courses. Several respondents commented on the knowledge gap between studies of English at upper secondary and studies of English at university level. It is

worth to mention that the knowledge gap referred to by the students most often are described as knowledge about the language rather than the level of language used:

[My translation] How much of the university English that has not been covered in the upper secondary – more specifically grammar, linguistics and how to write an essay (the process and the reference systems etc.).

While course intensity and depth of knowledge were very prevailing amongst the respondents' answers, the two other aspects, *workload* and *student independency*, were frequently mentioned as well. Responses regarding amount of work needed in the course were categorized as *workload*. Several respondents who ascribed difference in workload as the most surprising aspect in going from upper secondary to university English, focused on the amount of reading needed. One respondent writes:

[My translation] A lot more reading. I do not read very quickly and have a hard time keeping my interest up when I read certain texts/books.

Other respondents are more general in their description of the workload:

The vastness of material we were supposed to cover. It differs alot [sic] from upper secondary, where the workload in English classes were very low.

The fourth category, student independency, entails responses about individual responsibilities as a student. Numerous respondents commented on the amount of independency required to study English at the university.

In summary, the results showed that the respondents have different levels of preparedness when measuring the different aspects of the EFL-learner. The respondents perceived themselves as relatively well prepared in terms of their language abilities, apart from their reading speed. Furthermore, they felt somewhat less prepared to use reference

systems as well as using the writing process to develop ideas. In comparison to the language abilities, the respondents reported themselves as considerably less prepared to use meta-cognitive learning strategies. This was especially true for strategies involving time-management. The results also showed an unexpected relation between poor time-management and keeping deadlines, where a low preparedness in time-management was not reflected in the preparedness to keep deadlines. The respondents reported that explicitness regarding expectations for them as students would have aided them most in their studies. When asked to describe what had surprised them the most in going from upper secondary studies to university studies, the respondents tended to follow four distinct themes: *workload*, *student independency*, *course intensity*, and *depth of knowledge*

Discussion

This section presents the discussion of the results in relation to the previously conducted research. The section is divided into four sub-sections. The section begins with a brief outline of key findings, as well as answering the research questions posed in the beginning of the paper. The remaining three sub-sections present the discussion of each key finding in greater detail.

Answering the Research Questions and Key Findings

The aim of the study was to investigate the difference between studies of English in upper secondary school (or equivalent) and studies of English in higher education. Two primary research questions guided this study. The first research question was: *(1) In what ways do university students feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies?* The results show that the students feel that their previous education prepared sufficiently in the majority of the areas measured. Areas regarding language abilities were ranked especially high. Their previous education also prepared them to keep deadlines and to attend class regularly. While the first research question aimed to

investigate how the students' previous studies had prepared them for English university studies, the second research question aimed to investigate the opposite: *(2) In what ways do they not feel that their upper secondary English education prepared them for university English studies?* The findings show that the students were much less prepared to use meta-cognitive learning strategies in their studies. While the students feel well prepared to keep deadlines, they have a harder time to properly organize their study time. The results indicate that the main difference between studies of English in upper secondary school and studies of English in higher education, is the arising need of learning strategies.

Sufficient Language Abilities

The first primary finding involves the students' language abilities. The results from the survey show that the respondents' EFL self-concept are perceived as good in relation to the demands of the English studies. In other words, the students rate their initial English language abilities as more than sufficient to partake in the course. These findings agree with the results of the study conducted by the European Commission (2011) regarding European language competencies. Although the study measured the language competency of Swedish 15-year-old's, the relation between the different language aspects seems to remain intact. It is worthy to note that the aforementioned study did not measure every item as measured in the present study. For instance, the European language competency survey did not measure the students' reading speed.

It is, however, evident that some students feel impaired by the difference in different aspects of language competency. The issue regarding speed is, for instance, a reoccurring theme among the respondents. 32.4% of the respondents replied that a better reading speed would have aided them in their studies. As previously mentioned, one student comment on this issue in particular:

[My translation] There is a lot more reading. I do not read very quickly and have a hard time to keep the interest up when reading certain texts or books.

The most logical explanation to the low self-concept regarding reading speed is that the students have a slow reading speed proficiency. However, it could also be explained by a false type of feedback-loop as a result of bad time management. A person's self-concept may be influenced by external points of criterion, such as perceived success or failure (Mercer, 2011). This means that a person's academic self-concept can be affected negatively if they are confronted with academic failure. A person who has not set aside the sufficient amount of time towards a new type of reading material could, hypothetically, damage their self-concept with regards to their reading speed. This hypothesis is supported by the items regarding meta-cognitive strategies, where the respondents reported an equally low preparedness to allocate time for reading.

In terms of writing abilities, the students feel less prepared to use reference systems. These findings echo the results of the study conducted by Foster (2002), who maintains that the technical aspects of writing tend to cause troubles among the students. This implies that the usage of referencing systems is not fully explored in the upper secondary education. It could also imply that studies of English in higher education require a higher level of meticulousness than studies of English in upper secondary education.

Keeping Deadlines Without a Need for Time-Management

The second primary finding concerns meta-cognitive strategies. The findings show that the students in this study have a generally low preparedness to use time-management strategies. This confirms the results of the study conducted by Holdaway and Kelloway (1987). However, the findings also imply that the lack of time-management related strategies

is not related to the students’ ability to keep deadlines. While 77.1% of the respondents reported that they are *prepared or well prepared* to keep deadlines, only 34.3% of the students reported that they were *prepared or well prepared* to begin assignments well in advance (see figure 4). This seemingly conflicting relation could be explained by students resorting to cramming in their studies, as described by Michaels and Miethe (1989). One possible understanding of this finding is that the tendency to cram has been attained during their previous educational experiences.

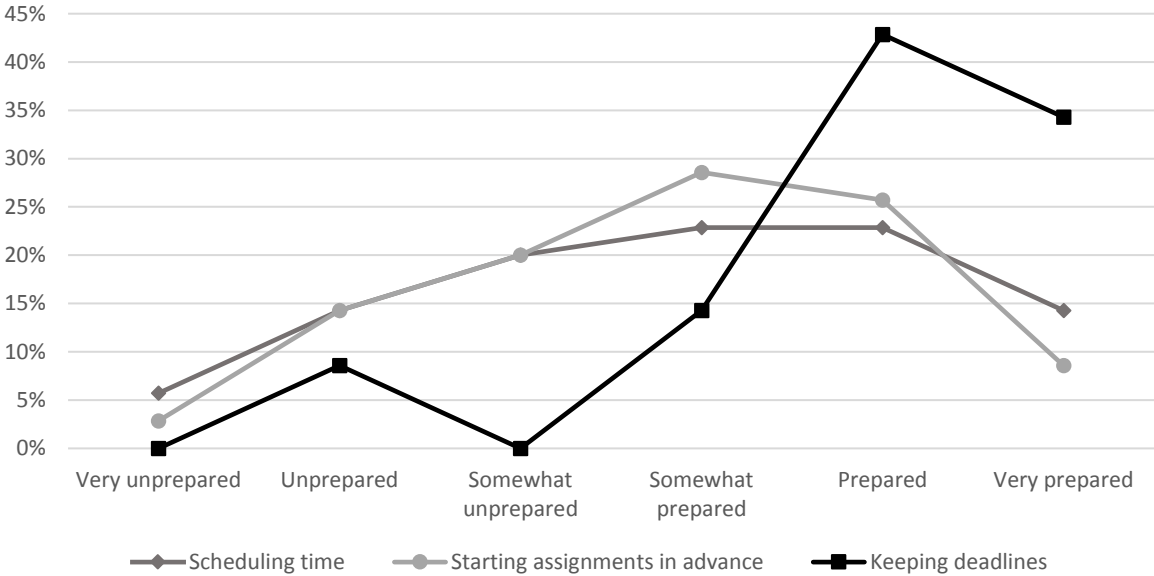


Figure 4: Frequency in items measuring time-management

However, another possible interpretation is that the tendency to cram is an unfortunate consequence of students undervaluing the time needed to complete assignments. The students participating in the study by Soiferman (2012) reported that they consistently underestimated the time needed to complete writing assignments in time during their first year in higher education. This explanation is also supported by the results of the open-ended question in the present study where a bigger workload and course intensity was ascribed as one of the key differences between studies of English in upper secondary and studies of English in higher education. While this hypothesis seems plausible, only 26.1% of the students in the present

study reported that more independent studies would have aided them in their studies. This could be seen as an indication that the majority of the respondents regarded the amount of time spent studying as sufficient. In that case, the underestimation of time would not be a plausible explanation.

The proposition offered by Soiferman (2012), does, however, shed light on another issue closely related to time management: learner autonomy. Several respondents in the present study reported that the newfound level of independence was an unwelcoming surprise in their studies. One respondent even commented that there was an extreme amount of responsibility required as opposed to what was needed in the upper secondary education. Foster (2002) hypothesizes that it is the lack of time-management in previous education that could be the reason for a lack of preparedness to manage one's studies. Several other studies confirm that the ability to plan and organize one's time could heavily impair the academic outcome (Nonis & Hudson, 2010; Taylor & Drury, 2005; Hultberg, Plos, Hendry & Kjellgren, 2008).

Approaches to Studies and Locus of Responsibility

The third primary finding refers to the respondents' approaches to their studies. Two of the three top results in the item set measuring the students approaches to their studies⁶ refer to external sources of control. This can be viewed in the light of the findings of the OECD-report on the Swedish school system (2015), where it is shown that Swedish students tend to ascribe their underperformance to be caused by something other than their own lack of effort (p. 37). This skewed locus of control is further mirrored among some of the answers to the open-ended question about what had surprised them the most ingoing from upper secondary school to university studies:

⁶ See figure 3: Reported approaches to their studies

[My translation] The combination of a mountain of assignments we are expected to keep track of in combination with the somewhat condescending tone. In upper secondary school, all the teachers stuck to one thing or the other. and

The big gap in what is needed for a passing grade and the inhuman/unkind discourse when asking for guidance from teachers

This can be compared with the study by Gan et al. (2004). They found that 50% of the unsuccessful students commented negatively about the supportiveness of the teachers. In other words, the results of this study could indicate that the students are disconnected from the relationship between their efforts and their academic achievement.

This reasoning could, however, be a double-edged sword. While it is plausible to ascribe the findings as an indication of a skewed locus of responsibility, it could also be explained at face value. The top item of the item set measuring student's approaches to their studies is *more explicitness regarding expectations for you as a student*. Rantanen (1999) suggest that there is, in fact, an ongoing problem with student expectations working in the background of different faculties. With this reading, it could simply be understood as a need to foreground expectations for students within the linguistic department.

Conclusion

To summarize, the findings of this study show that the students have a high sense of EFL self-concept in almost all areas. However, the reading speed and the usage of reference systems seem to be ranked lower than other items. The study also shows that the students have a hard time to apply meta-cognitive learning strategies in their university studies. While this could be explained by involuntary cramming situations due to underestimations of time required to complete studies, it could also be a sign of cramming by choice. Overall, the

learners have a low ability to plan and organize their studies. The findings also show that the students believe more foregrounded expectations for them as students would have aided them the most in their studies. While this could be explained as the students not connecting their own effort with their academic achievement, it could also be explained as the instructors having implicit expectations for the students. The difference between studies of English in upper secondary school and studies of English in higher education, then, may be described as mainly consisting of a difference in learning strategies.

Future Study

The study has found several possible connections that could be researched further. The hypothesis that bad time-management can influence a learners EFL self-concept regarding reading speed demonstrates a potentially fragile relationship between academic skill and learning strategies. It would be fruitful to explore whether such a relationship could be proven and if so, which domains within students' language self-concept can be affected by insufficient learning strategies. It would also be interesting to see if there is a reverse relation between self-concepts and learning strategies. That is, could a good set of learning strategies yield an inflated self-concept? Last, but not least, the study shows a difference between the two groups in their perceived speaking abilities. It would be interesting to see if this difference would be recurring in a similar but different context. There could be some element in the teacher education program that creates this difference.

Teaching Implications

The findings of this research also suggest that there are some areas regarding teaching that could be examined further. In order to address the low preparedness to use meta-cognitive learning strategies, the English teachers in Sweden may need evaluate how they scaffold their students approaches to studies and learning strategies. One implication of this study is that the upper secondary education should focus more on encouraging the students to use learning

strategies, if they wish to facilitate a smooth transition to higher education. Too much hand-holding to relieve the students of having to organize and plan their studies during their upper secondary education, could, in fact, be counter-productive as this also relieves them of important lessons regarding how to implement and use appropriate learning strategies. This also hinders the students to fully position themselves as agents in their learning.

However, the transition to university cannot be solely the responsibility of upper secondary schools. Universities and university colleges also need to help smooth the transition as the students often comes from a very differently structured environment. The transition between upper secondary school and higher education could be scaffolded by *(a) introducing key learner strategies at an earlier stage* and *(b) recognizing the students' previous experiences within the higher education context*. This approach would help in creating the bridge needed to avoid the gap between upper secondary school and higher education.

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Appendix A

This appendix contains the questionnaire used in the survey.



Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey! You have been selected to participate because of your enrollment in an English course at Lund University. The questions in this survey address your experiences from the course and how prepared you felt in terms of language proficiency and study techniques. The data from this questionnaire will inform a study that aims to examine how upper secondary studies (or equivalent) prepare students for English studies at an academic level. The study is part of an essay project in English teacher education. Your answers will be treated anonymously. By completing and submitting this questionnaire you consent to the use of your anonymous responses in presentations and publications. The questionnaire consists of 16 questions and will take approximately 6 minutes to answer.

1. Choose your gender:

- Female
- Male
- If other, please specify

2. In which of the following courses did you participate?

- ÄEND01/ÄENB11 - English I (Teacher Education)
- ENGA03/ENGA04 - English Level 1 (full-time)
- ENGH01 and ENGH02 - English Level 1 (half-time)

3. Are you currently enrolled in any of the courses mentioned above?

- Yes
- No

4. Which of the following types of education have you finished prior to the English course? Mark all that apply.

- Upper secondary school (i.e. Gymnasieskola)
- Folk high school (i.e. Folkhögskola)
- Municipal adult education (i.e. Komvux)
- University/college course
- If other, please specify

13. Choose the 3 items that you feel would have aided you the most in your English studies

- Better reading comprehension
- Knowing how to take notes
- Better reading speed
- Knowledge about different genres in writing
- Better control of the writing process
- More lectures and seminars during the university course
- Better grammar
- Wider vocabulary
- More guidance from the instructors
- Better control of pronunciation when speaking
- Better control of nerves when speaking in front of people
- Studying independently more often
- Clearer instructions from university lecturers
- More explicitness from lecturers regarding expectations for you as a student
- If other, please specify

Comment

14. What surprised you the most in going from upper secondary English studies to university English studies?

15. Including lectures, how many hours per week did you expect to spend on studies?