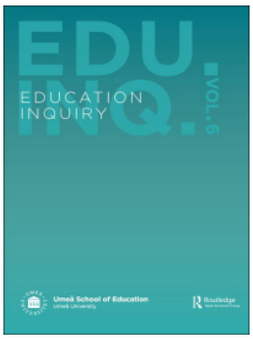

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Reading vs. listening to literature in Swedish and Norwegian lower secondary classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In a time of declining reading comprehension and weak interest in reading among children and teenagers, learning more about how different kinds of texts are read in school is important. This is why this study aims to provide knowledge on how language arts teachers implement reading in their everyday instruction. The study relies on video data from 42 lower secondary classrooms from Sweden and Norway. Focusing on literary texts, it investigates and compares reading practices in language arts instruction. The study examines to what extent literary texts are read silently vs. listened to, and how teachers promote students' reading comprehension in both reading conditions. The most important finding was that students in both countries listened to literary texts more often than they read them silently on their own. This practice was somewhat more common in Sweden than in Norway, where students in several classrooms were given time to read books of their own choice. Furthermore, when reading literary texts aloud, Swedish teachers interacted with students more often than Norwegian teachers in ways that can be assumed to promote students' understanding of the text. Consequences of teachers preferring that students listen to texts instead of reading them silently also are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Literature; reading aloud; silent reading; reading practices; video observations

Introduction

Learning to read is essential for all citizens. It is a key route to knowledge acquisition, employment, and to building a developed society and culture. Reading traverses all sectors of life, from refrigerator notes to international climate protocols. Failure to attain literacy for all is a failure of personal, cultural, political, and economic imports. Thus, the growing concern in countries worldwide about declining interest and ability of young people's reading is by all standards a critical affair. Questions on how children and teenagers learn to read in school and what schools do to foster both recognition and interest in reading and advanced forms of literacy are crucial to students, parents, politicians, teachers, and scholars alike. To many children, literature offers a natural path into a reading life. Stories and poetry are important both because they offer an access into the lives and thoughts of others, and because they provide an engaging way to progress fluent, attentive, and critical reading.

In the recent decade, the modes of reading in the classroom have changed rapidly. Much have already been written about the gradual switch from reading on paper to reading on screen (Baron, 2021; van der Weel & Mangen, 2022). A more recent shift in many classrooms is the genuine explosion of listening to text instead of reading it, especially listening to stories, either through teachers reading aloud or via recorded readings in digital learning systems (Stave, 2022). In countries such as Sweden and Norway, where digitalisation and students' access to their own computers or tablets are at a global forefront, this change is perhaps more tangible. Survey data has indicated a significant decrease of school-based time for reading in Sweden, especially of literary texts (Vinterek et al., 2022), and PIRLS and PISA results suggest that interest in reading is lower in Norway than in all the other participating countries (F. Jensen et al., 2023; Wagner et al., 2023). A recent survey among Swedish language arts teachers, published in the Swedish Teachers' Union magazine, indicated that listening instead of reading

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text was a common way not only of supporting weak readers' decoding, but also of easing already fluent readers' own processing of text (Lundberg, 2024). This shift is coming rapidly and transforms some of the basic principles and mechanisms of schooling. Therefore, it is crucial to probe the prevalence and characteristics of reading vs. listening to texts using solid datasets stemming from various sources. Teacher surveys will tell us certain things about trends in broad-based attitudes (Dixon & Oakhill, 2024; Smith et al., 2023), and student surveys will tell us other things about the experiences and turning points of young readers (Mangen & Baron, 2025). Looking into the actual classroom practices by use of large-scale video data, which is done in the present study, can be especially useful, for it allows us to explore literacy use as concrete practices, and reveal recurring features of which we are yet unaware, and therefore unable to ask about in surveys or interviews.

Studies show that frequent leisure time reading, especially of books, positively impacts both fluency and comprehension (Locher & Pfost, 2020; Torppa et al., 2020) and provides basis for more qualified school-based reading activities (Sullivan & Brown, 2015). The reality of declining reading interest among children and teenagers, and the fact that many report reading only out of necessity (Roe, 2020), puts increased pressure on teachers to promote both comprehension and engagement in reading literature. In one study, Tegmark et al. (2022) found that, according to students themselves, more interesting texts, opportunities to choose what to read, and more time for reading would entice them to read more at school. Whether more time spent on independent silent reading in the classroom implies strong effects on students' reading achievement is debated (Erbeli & Rice, 2022). Yet it seems clear that reduced time spent on grappling with text will certainly not improve achievements.

Sweden and Norway have similar ambitions regarding reading in school – and face similar challenges when it comes to the decline in students' reading proficiency and interest in reading (Jensen et al., 2023; Roe, 2020). Prior studies have found that teaching and learning practices across the Nordic countries share a set of key features (Jensen et al., 2019; Klette, 2018; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019, 2023; Wagner et al., 2023). This makes it relevant to examine and compare reading practices in Sweden and Norway, particularly because these countries also share several commonalities regarding cultural, political, and educational policy development (Kavli, 2018). By studying reading sessions in which students read silently or listen to literature in two different national contexts, it is possible to draw on contrasts and acquire knowledge of patterns and trajectories that might not appear, or at least be difficult to discern, within a single national context.

Extant research indicates that Nordic language arts teachers use literature much more frequently than non-fiction in their teaching (Magnusson et al., 2026). Students in the Nordic countries are primarily presented with narrative texts, for example contemporary short stories, excerpts from contemporary novels, and young adult novels. Poetry is seldom read or listened to but appears to be somewhat more common in Norway than in the other countries (Nissen et al., 2021, 2026). Often, literature appears to be used for the purpose of promoting students' general reading comprehension, rather than as a means to offer literary experiences (Nissen et al., 2026).

In the Swedish and Norwegian contexts, studies of classroom reading practices have previously shown for what purposes literature is read (Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Nissen et al., 2021), how reading comprehension strategies are used in teachers' everyday instruction (Magnusson et al., 2018), and what recurring obstacles to deep processing of texts occur in the classroom (Tengberg et al., 2022). We already know a great deal about differences in reading processes depending on whether texts are read on paper or on digital screens (Delgado et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2024; Støle et al., 2020). In the case of listening to vs. reading a text, there is still a lot more to learn. Regarding prevalent classroom practices, we would need to know more about the extent to which literary texts are listened to or read silently in the classroom, and how those forms of reading are related to teachers' instruction.

It is worth pointing out that the speed with which classroom practices change in this domain – partly driven forward by technological development – makes it difficult for research based on large-scale classroom data collections to keep pace and remain up to date. The video data for the present study were gathered in the years 2014–2019, which makes them somewhat dated in relation to present-day classroom practice and may thus be regarded a limitation of the research. On the other hand, this is about the same time as when the referred to studies by Vinterek et al. (2022) and Tegmark et al. (2022) gathered their data. This way, we provide a classroom observation perspective on a process of ongoing change of school-based

literacy practices that Vinterek at al. and Tegmark et al. have researched in the same context using surveys and interviews.

The present study aims to provide knowledge on how language arts teachers implement reading of literary texts in their everyday instruction. Literature, in this context, is defined as fictional narrative texts, drama, and poetry (including song lyrics). Note that the particular research interest in this study is devoted to the implementation of reading as an activity, and not to the forms of instruction that often follow reading. Focusing on the reading of literature in Swedish and Norwegian lower secondary language arts classrooms, during a time of high-paced ongoing digitalisation, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) How are literary texts read in language arts instruction? Specifically, to what extent are literary texts read silently vs. listened to?
(2) Are there differences between Sweden and Norway regarding the length of reading sessions and the extent to which literary texts are read silently vs. listened to?
(3) To what extent do teachers activate students to promote reading comprehension in relation to silent reading vs. listening to literary texts?
(4) Are there differences between Sweden and Norway regarding the extent to which teachers activate students to promote reading comprehension (in both reading modes)?

Reading vs. listening to text

Reading and listening are two different ways of experiencing literary texts. Based on the total population, Swedes and Norwegians are among the most avid readers and listeners of books in Europe (Statistics Sweden, 2025). In Norway, book reading has increased since the 1990s (Statistics Norway, 2025), whereas in Sweden, there has been a decline over the same period (Statistics Sweden, 2025). In both Sweden and Norway, as well as in many other countries, the use of audiobooks has increased significantly over the past decade (Berglund, 2025; Have & Pedersen, 2021; Statistics Norway, 2025; Statistics Sweden, 2025).

The increase in audiobooks can be considered evidence that more people are accessing written texts through listening. Some people would even say that it does not matter if your read a novel or a short story by decoding the text yourself or if you access the content by listening to someone else reading it, either through an audiobook or in a classroom where the teacher or other students read aloud. However, to define the different ways in which texts can be approached as "reading by listening" vs. "reading by seeing" (cf. Tattersall Wallin & Nolin, 2020) is, in our view, to blur the concept of reading. Reading a text certainly involves more than seeing it, and the interaction between active decoding and ongoing comprehension is a lot more complex (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Kintsch & Rawson, 2008; Wolf, 2018), thus making it unwarranted to suggest that listening to text can simply replace the process of decoding and its intricate relation to linguistic comprehension. As to the relative benefits of either medium when it comes to learning from text, recalling information, or developing comprehension, the research evidence remains mixed (Rogowsky et al., 2016). However, a meta-analysis showed that reading was beneficial compared to listening when it was self-paced, and beneficial compared to listening when assessing inferential or general comprehension rather than literal comprehension (Clinton-Lisell, 2022).

In the classroom, different ways of reading and listening are often intertwined with each other or alternate. Swanson et al. (2016) characterise these as different *reading modes*, such as individual (silent) reading, students reading aloud (in pairs, groups, or whole class), the teacher reading aloud, and listening to audio recordings. Unlike experiments where researchers can control which format or reading mode the participants should use, most classrooms are far more complex, for example when the teachers have to deal with students who access the same text in different ways. It is also important to acknowledge that different students, with different learner characteristics (such as fluency and prior knowledge), may benefit from different reading modes (Baron, 2021; Singh & Alexander, 2022).

Reading: a matter of decoding and understanding texts

According to the famous reading model "The Simple View of Reading" (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), reading is the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension ($R = D \times C$). Neither decoding nor comprehension is

sufficient on its own. Without linguistic comprehension, decoding text has no meaning. Equally, having linguistic comprehension, but no ability to decode, does not make one able to read even the simplest of texts. Although more fine-tuned models are needed to fully explain differences between and development of readers (Castles et al., 2018; Hoffman, 2017), studies confirm that the two components of The Simple View of Reading explain almost all variance of reading ability (Lervåg et al., 2017). Further, newer research-based models explaining the reading process, like the Active View of Reading Model (Duke & Cartwright, 2021), also include word recognition and decoding skills as essential aspects of reading.

Previously, reading was viewed as an ability that children acquire during their early years in school, but this has changed. Nowadays, reading is understood as an expanding set of knowledge, skills and strategies that can be developed throughout one's life (OECD, 2019). Reading comprehension is a complex construct and involves several different processes (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Duke et al., 2021; Kintsch & Rawson, 2008). When students develop their reading comprehension, aspects such as decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and reading speed are fundamental. Furthermore, use of prior knowledge, reading comprehension strategies and the ability to monitor the reading process are important (Afflerbach et al., 2020). Decoding is a matter of word recognition, and of perceiving how words function in clauses and sentences (Castles et al., 2018; Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Kintsch & Rawson, 2008; Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, readers perform semantic analyses to determine the meaning of a text. When readers only comprehend what is expressed explicitly in a text, their understanding is shallow. To understand a text in depth means to construct mental models of concepts and situations described by the text (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; McNamara & Magliano, 2009). In this process – which is not restricted to the verbal domain, but also involves imagery, emotions, and associative connections to personal experiences – it is necessary to combine information provided by the text with prior knowledge and personal goals (Kintsch & Rawson, 2008).

To a large extent, well-developed reading comprehension is an automatised process that can be achieved through practice (Castles et al., 2018; Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). For unexperienced readers, decoding and identifying words limit reading comprehension. As readers become more fluent, the limiting factor shifts from word recognition to comprehension of the content of the text. A well-developed vocabulary and the ability to process information efficiently characterise experienced readers (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Kintsch & Rawson, 2008). Furthermore, experienced readers can organise information, make inferences and apprehend the macrostructure of a text. Inexperienced readers lack these competencies. Therefore, they must expend considerable effort when reading unfamiliar texts, and their understanding of a text generally remains at a shallow level. To understand the text in more depth, they need help to engage in active and strategic processing of the text (Afflerbach et al., 2020; Okkinga et al., 2018)

There are many studies emphasising that teaching students how to approach different texts, for example by explicitly focusing on reading comprehension strategies, may support and improve reading comprehension, both when it comes to fiction and non-fiction (e.g. Afflerbach et al., 2020; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). It should be noted that there have been some concerns about *how* reading comprehension strategies are taught in many classrooms – often as a goal in itself rather than as a scaffold to improve comprehension (Duke et al., 2021; Roe & Blikstad Balas, 2022). As we know, not all strategies are equally effective for different purposes, and not all strategy teaching is equally meaningful. But, as Duke et al. (2021, p. 668) argue, poor implementation should not in itself legitimise abandoning teaching ways to read that may improve comprehension of texts.

Listening: another way of accessing and understanding texts

As we have shown, many factors affect reading comprehension. The same is true for listening comprehension – and there are several commonalities regarding comprehension regardless of whether reading on paper and screens or listening to audio (Perfetti et al., 2008). Comprehension across modes is dependent on the ability to allocate attention (Kane et al., 2001; Singh & Alexander, 2022). The big question is therefore not about the modes themselves, but about what possibilities and challenges readers or listeners will face when trying to get access to, for example, a short story through reading or listening. As explained by Singh and Alexander (2022, p. 681), the "level of attentional control associated with listening or reading could lead to differences in comprehension when a learner engages with audiobooks or print books". M. C. Wolf et al. (2019) found that only part of the comprehension process is domain-general and not influenced by the

modality (i.e. reading or listening) in which information is transmitted. Therefore, they argued that reading and listening comprehension should not be viewed as two versions of the same general comprehension skill.

One key reason why audio is so witnessing a rise in educational contexts is because it can "decrease emphasis on decoding, so that those who struggle with print can focus on meaning and grow their knowledge with greater facility" (Singh & Alexander, 2022, p. 679). Those who insist that audio can be or should be considered reading and refer to it with that particular label, often acknowledge that the visual decoding that takes place when reading print is not there when someone gets access to a text through listening. Yet, as Have and Pedersen (2021) explain, it is possible to talk about auditive decoding of an audiobook, which may provide different literary experiences. Further, while there are many benefits with audio combined with print (for example in situations where a teacher reads a print text aloud, or where students listen to a text they have available in print in front of them), research also suggests that audio alone can be challenging for comprehension because it is less permanent than print: It is harder to re-read, you have less control over the pace of the narrator, and it can be harder to use adaptive strategies while listening than while reading (Singh & Alexander, 2022). However, if print and audio are both available in the reading and listening situation, audio may have a positive effect on comprehension for some students (Baron, 2021).

How texts are read in school

International assessment projects such as PIRLS and PISA regularly measure students' reading achievement (e.g. Mullis et al., 2023; Schleicher, 2019), and studies of various kinds have investigated reading and reading activities from multiple perspectives (e.g. Cuevas et al., 2014; Gabrielsen & Blikstad Balas, 2020; Jensen et al., 2024; Magnusson et al., 2018; Sønneland, 2019). As for how and to what extent literary and other texts are read vs. listened to in school, we have only limited knowledge. Ruwette et al. (2020) investigated which reading promotion activities Dutch teachers used in Grades 5 and 6. Based on survey data, they found that "free reading" was a common activity, and that teachers mainly promoted reading fictional texts. On average, these teachers reported that they stimulated students' reading of children's books, and/or read children's books to the class more than once a week. Merga (2013) asked West Australian students (in Grades 8 and 10) about their experience with regular silent reading and found that less than half the students in her study were provided with regular silent reading periods. However, this was much more common for students in Grade 8 than for those in Grade 10. Generally, students had a positive attitude towards silent reading. Several students expressed that this was the only time they read books, so Merga (2013) argued that silent reading also holds an important place in secondary school.

In a more recent study based on student questionnaires, Vinterek et al. (2022) investigated how many pages of continuous texts Swedish students in middle and lower secondary school read during an ordinary school day. They found that between 2007 and 2017, the proportion of students who read one full page or more had decreased considerably. In 2017, the group of lower secondary students not reading at all (on the day of the investigation) had increased from 33% (in 2007) to 50%. Furthermore, the number of lower secondary students who did not read fiction had increased from 62% to 87%. For middle school students, the decline in fiction reading was even larger, and the authors noted that reading patterns for middle school students were now similar to reading patterns in lower secondary school.

In an American context, Swanson et al. (2016) observed nine language arts teachers and 11 social studies teachers to investigate text reading practices in naturally occurring instruction (Grades 7–12). The proportion of time spent reading was similar across the two subject areas. In language arts, reading comprised 14.8% of the total observed time, but varied considerably between teachers (from 6.5% to 46.3%). Teachers often read aloud (37% of total reading time), but students also read on their own (20%) or listened to audiotapes (30%). Furthermore, students read aloud in some instances. Narrative texts dominated (57.5% of total reading time), although students also experienced expository and other kinds of texts (including poetry).

Due to limited research in this area, it is difficult to draw conclusions about students' school related reading. However, although students seem to read less often in school than in the past (Vinterek et al., 2022), free reading of literary texts still seems to be a rather common activity, at least in middle school (Ruwette et al., 2020). As students grow older, teachers appear to give them less time to read silently on their own (Merga, 2013). Choice of reading mode, e.g. individual silent reading or the teacher reading aloud, can

be assumed to affect students' reading ability, reading fluency and reading comprehension in different ways, which makes it relevant to investigate more closely under what conditions literature is accessed (i.e. whether it is read silently or listened to) and how comprehension is promoted in technology-rich school contexts such as lower secondary classrooms in Sweden and Norway. This is what the present study aims at.

Methods

Participants and data collection procedures

This study is part of *Linking Instruction and Student Achievement* (*LISA*), a large-scale video study investigating teaching across the Nordic countries. Four consecutive language arts lessons were recorded in 84 classrooms (Sweden: $N = 38$; Norway: $N = 46$) in the first year of lower secondary school.[1] Lessons varied in length, but most commonly lasted for 40–45 minutes. To increase generalisability, recruitment of sample classrooms was based on a stratification using several variables, such as locality, students' socio-economic status, and national test average (see Klette et al., 2017; Tengberg et al., 2021 for details). For this particular study, a subsample of 42 classrooms (Sweden: $N = 19$; Norway $N = 23$) was selected for analysis because lessons in these classrooms contained either reading or listening to literary texts. Most teachers in these classrooms were female. As shown in Table 1, the Swedish teachers were older (median: 40–49 years old) than their Norwegian colleagues (median: 30–39 years old). Moreover, the Swedish teachers were more qualified in language arts (median: 61–90 ECTS) than the Norwegian teachers (median: 31–60 ECTS).

When collecting data, two fixed cameras recorded classroom instruction from two angles. This kind of video footage captures social actions in a neutral way, with no active decisions made while it is being shot (Erickson, 2006). Therefore, videos from different classrooms are comparable, and it is left to the researcher to interpret them. The teachers were encouraged to follow their normal lesson plans. The captured video data thus comprises naturally occurring instruction and includes a variety of subject matter within the Swedish and Norwegian language arts subjects respectively.

While four full lessons were recorded in each classroom, only limited portions of each teacher's instruction were analysed in this study. Therefore, the reading activities included in this study should not be seen as representative of these teachers' instruction. In some classrooms, reading literature was part of a theme that would last for several lessons. In other classrooms, teachers explained that reading literature was a recurring activity that took place once a week. To provide a broad picture of how literary texts are read and listened to in Swedish and Norwegian classrooms, all available lessons were used in the analysis even though the two subsamples differed in size. Noteworthy, this study does not examine how large a proportion of lesson time was devoted to reading and listening. For this, equally large data sets – and a different kind of analysis – would have been necessary.

Studying human subjects in a public setting requires strict procedures to preserve participants' confidentiality, and a deliberate code of conduct to avoid unnecessary intrusion or negative impact on

Table 1. Teacher demographic data.

		Sweden	Norway
Gender			
	Female	13	19
	Male	6	4
Age (years)			
	20–29	0	5
	30–39	3	8
	40–49	12	5
	50–59	3	1
	60+	1	2
	Missing	0	2
ECTS*			
	None	0	1
	0–30	0	1
	31–60	4	14
	61–90	7	2
	90+	8	2
	Missing	0	3

*Education in language arts.

participants' work or integrity. All teachers and students (and student guardians) were informed of the details of the study and signed consent to participate before the data collection began. Because some students chose not to participate in the study, the classrooms contained "blind zones" where they could participate in the instruction without being captured on video.

Analysis

The original data set of 84 video-recorded classrooms has previously been used to investigate Swedish and Norwegian literature instruction from other perspectives (e.g. Gabrielsen & Blikstad Balas, 2020; Gabrielsen et al., 2019; Nissen, 2023; Nissen et al., 2021). It should be noted that while the present study profits in several ways from experiences made in those prior studies, it makes a distinct and new selection within the original data set to address a specific research problem, which has not previously been investigated in the LISA-project. The analytical approach comprised several stages, as presented in Figure 1. Analyses were carried out by the first author, but criteria for coding and borderline cases have been discussed among all three authors.

For this study, the video data was screened to identify all *lessons* (Sweden = 34; Norway = 39) during which literary texts (e.g. novels, short stories and poems) were read or listened to. Then, the number of *reading sessions* was determined. A reading session would begin when the teacher told students to start reading, or when they began listening to a literary text. It would end when the reading or listening ceased. In Swedish and Norwegian classrooms, there are no standardised designated timeslots in the lesson plan set aside for reading. Therefore, the length and duration of such sessions could vary greatly: from short sessions where students read silently or listened to a literary text prior to other activities that did not include reading – to longer sessions where almost the entire lesson could be defined as a reading session. Fifty-four literary reading sessions were observed in the Norwegian classrooms and 42 in the Swedish classrooms. Most commonly, lessons included one reading session, but when more than one literary text was read, and/or when different reading modes were used during the same lesson, this was viewed as two (and sometimes more) reading sessions.

The lengths of all reading sessions were measured in minutes and seconds. The Swedish students spent a total of 9 h 42 min reading or listening to literary texts while students in the Norwegian classrooms spent

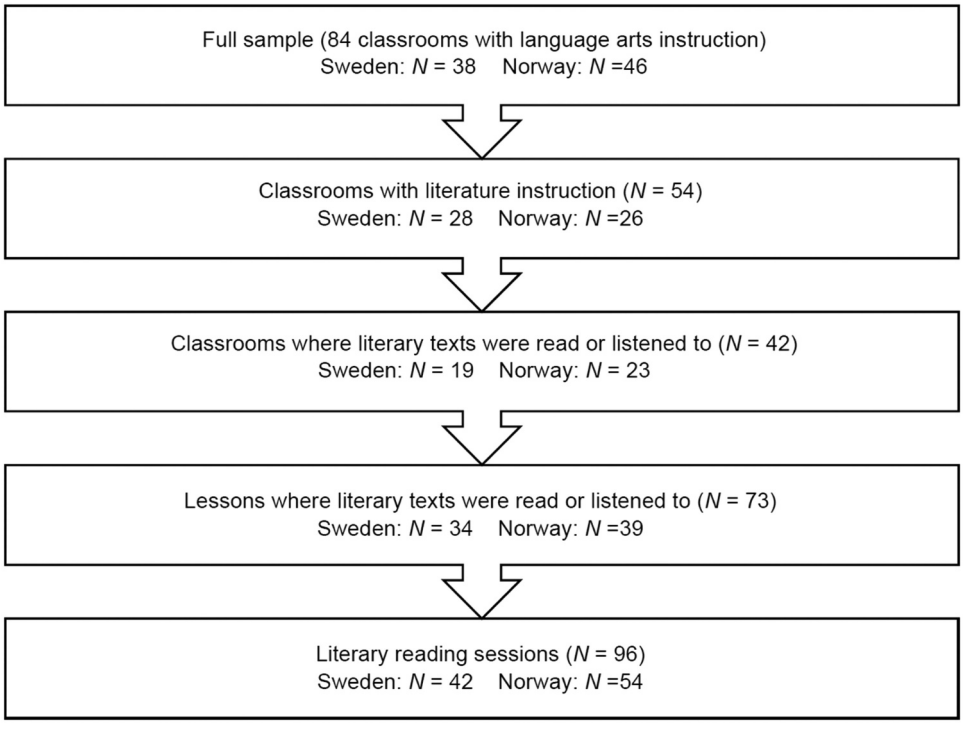

Figure 1. From full sample to literary reading sessions.

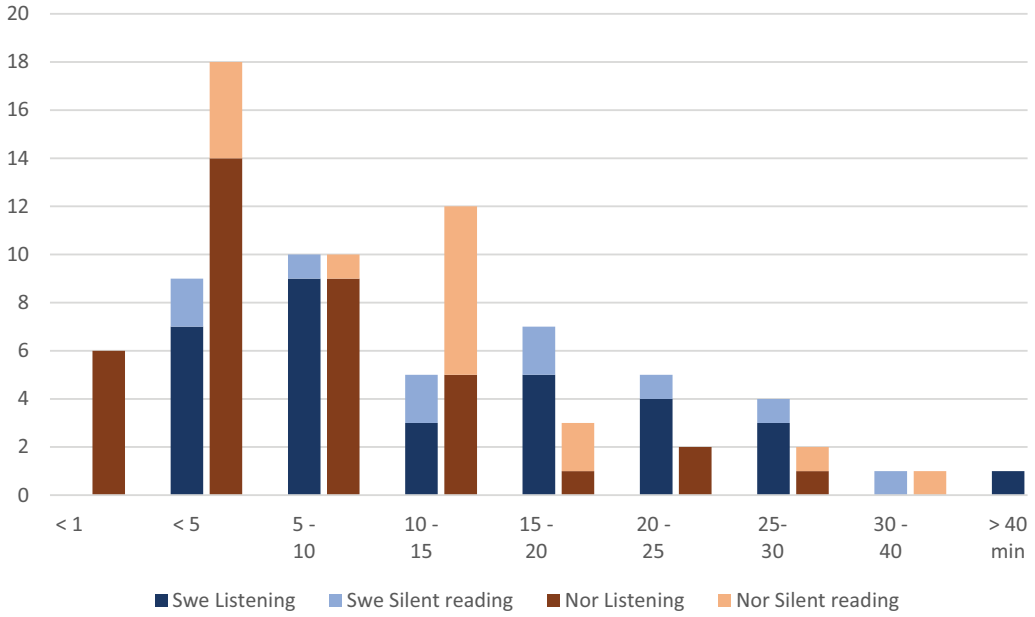

Figure 2. Number of reading sessions (within subsamples) when literary texts were read or listened to (in relation to time).

a total of 7 h 53 min on these activities. Further, reading modes were noted (e.g. *individual (silent) reading*, *the teacher reading aloud* and *listening to audiobooks*) and categorised into *reading silently* or *listening to literary texts*. Finally, in focusing on the reading sessions, a binary scale (occurrence/non-occurrence) was used to register whether teachers used methods for activating students to promote reading comprehension (e.g. asking questions and encouraging students to use reading comprehension strategies). This way we provided data to address the third research question. The methods used to promote reading comprehension were not analysed in themselves in this study. It was only noted whether they were present or not in relation to the different reading modes.

Descriptive analyses were used to describe the observed reading practices in the full sample and in the two national subsamples. In order to address research questions two and four regarding differences between the two countries, we separated the Swedish and Norwegian subsamples, and IBM SPSS Statistics was used to carry out inferential analyses. To compare the lengths of reading sessions, we recoded the measurements on the interval scale (minutes and seconds) into ordinal categories (see Figure 2) and then applied the Mann-Whitney U-test. The Pearson Chi-Square test was applied when data were binary (teachers' methods for activating students to promote reading comprehension).

Results

In this study, both Swedish and Norwegian students more often listened to literary texts than read them. As shown in Table 2, the proportion of reading sessions during which students listened to literature was 73%, as compared to 27% when they read silently on their own. Most commonly, literary texts were read aloud by the teachers (45% of all reading sessions), but there was also a substantial number of reading sessions in

Table 2. How literary texts were read.

	Number of reading sessions	Proportion of reading sessions	Time spent reading hh: mm	Time spent reading (percentage)
Listening to literary texts	**70**	**73%**	**11:18**	**64%**
Teacher reading aloud	*43*	*45%*	*6:32*	*37%*
(Other) student/s reading aloud	*17*	*18%*	*2:52*	*16%*
Videos, audiobooks, singing etc.	*10*	*10%*	*1:54*	*11%*
Reading silently	**26**	**27%**	**6:17**	**36%**
Total	**96**		**17:35**	

Table 3. How literary texts were read: differences across the Swedish and Norwegian samples.

	Number of reading sessions	Reading sessions (percentage)	Time spent reading hh: mm	Time spent reading (percentage)
Listening to literary texts				
Sweden	32	76%	07:03	73%
Norway	38	70%	04:15	54%
Reading silently				
Sweden	10	24%	02:39	27%
Norway	16	30%	03:38	46%

which students encountered literature in other ways: they heard peers reading aloud (e.g. in groups), were encouraged to pay attention to song lyrics in music videos, listened to audiobooks, or sang (see Table 2). In most of these sessions, students not only listened, but also had access to a printed version of the text in front of them. However, the design of the study does not allow us to determine to what extent the students actually followed the text themselves while they listened.

The time spent reading or listening to literary texts varied considerably, both within and between countries (see Figure 2). The duration of reading sessions ranged from less than one minute to more than 40 minutes. On average, reading sessions were shorter in Norwegian classrooms (median: 5–10 minutes) than in Swedish classrooms (median: 10–15 minutes): 63% of the Norwegian reading sessions lasted less than 10 minutes, compared to 45% of the Swedish reading sessions. A Mann-Whitney U-test comparing the length of reading sessions in which students listened to literary texts in Sweden and Norway respectively indicated a statistically significant difference between the countries, $U = 873.00$, $z = 3.20$, $p = .001$, $N = 70$. This suggests that reading sessions in which students listened to literary texts were significantly longer in Sweden than in Norway. However, when comparing reading sessions in which students read silently on their own, no statistically significant difference was found between the two countries, $U = 95.500$, $z = .84$, $p = .421$, $N = 26$.

Swedish students spent a relatively larger number of sessions, and more time, listening to literary texts than reading silently on their own, compared to Norwegian students (see Table 3). In the Swedish sample, 76% of the reading sessions and 73% of the time was spent listening to literary texts compared to 70% and 54% respectively in the Norwegian sample. Notably, the Norwegian students were more often given time to read silently in books of their own choosing (11 reading sessions) than Swedish students were (2 reading sessions). In these reading sessions, students often read for extended periods (10 minutes or more).

Teacher methods for activating students to promote reading comprehension were present in almost half of the observed reading sessions (43%) (see Table 4). As shown, these instances of activating students were more common when literary texts were listened to than when they were read silently. When reading aloud, teachers would frequently interrupt their reading and ask questions about the text or encourage students to use reading comprehension strategies. This way, they gauged students' understanding and drew their attention to important details in the text. Some teachers would initiate pre-reading activities, both when students were expected to listen to a text and when they were expected to read it on their own. For example, teachers would ask their students to predict what the story would be about. These practices occurred in both countries but were more common in the Swedish sample than in the Norwegian one (see Table 4). A Pearson Chi-Square test revealed that Swedish teachers significantly more often than their Norwegian colleagues used methods to activate students to promote comprehension during reading sessions in which students listened to literary texts, χ^2 (1, $N = 70$) = 6.57, $p = .010$. The fact that Swedish reading sessions were generally longer than Norwegian ones could not explain this difference. There was no statistically significant difference between Swedish and Norwegian teachers' use of such methods during sessions in which students read literary texts silently on their own, χ^2 (1, $N = 26$) = 0.006, $p = .973$.

Table 4. Reading sessions when teachers activated students to promote reading comprehension.

	Listening to literary texts			Reading silently		
	Reading sessions	Activation to promote comprehension present		*Reading sessions*	Activation to promote comprehension present	
	Number	Number	Percentage	*Number*	Number	Percentage
Sweden	*32*	19	56%	*10*	2	20%
Norway	*38*	11	29%	*16*	3	19%
Total	*70*	30	43%	*26*	5	19%

Discussion

Focusing on literary texts, this study investigated and compared reading practices in Swedish and Norwegian lower secondary language arts classrooms. The study aimed to provide knowledge on how language arts teachers implement reading of literary texts in their everyday instruction. More precisely, it investigated to what extent literary texts were read silently vs. listened to, and to what extent teachers activated students to promote reading comprehension in relation to silent reading vs. listening to literary texts. Moreover, it investigated whether there were differences between Sweden and Norway regarding the length of reading sessions, the extent to which literary texts were read silently vs. listened to, and the extent to which teachers activated students to promote reading comprehension (in both reading modes).

The most important finding was that students in both countries spent more time listening to literary texts than reading them silently on their own. Almost two thirds of the time (64%) spent with literary texts was devoted to listening rather than reading on one's own. This dominance of listening was more prominent in the Swedish classrooms (73% of the time) than in the Norwegian classrooms (54% of the time). Activities to promote comprehension were present in relation to both reading modes but were more prevalent when texts were listened to than when they were read silently by students. When reading aloud, the Swedish teachers were more prone to interact with their students in ways to promote understanding of the text at hand than the Norwegian teachers were.

Reading silently and listening to text are two modes through which literature can be accessed, both offering different opportunities for experience and comprehension. Depending on what teachers want to achieve in their instruction, they may choose, vary, and adjust reading modes accordingly. For example, listening to someone reading aloud can motivate students to engage in reading for pleasure (Gambrell, 2011) and help them figure out aspects of the text that are difficult for them to comprehend when reading it on their own (Roe & Blikstad Balas, 2022). The fact that teachers in this study provided more instructional support during listening than during silent reading seems related to their frequent practice of reading aloud to students. Whole-class read-alouds with all students focused on the same text element invite interactive dialogue about the text in a way that silent reading normally does not (Ariail & Albright, 2005; DeJulio et al., 2022), especially if each student is reading a different book, which was often the case in Norway. However, alternative forms of listening to text, for example listening to audiobooks or audio-recorded texts on digital learning platforms, are likely to result in less teacher-student interaction about text comprehension.

The practice of decoding through individual reading was toned down in many of the classrooms observed. While students often had access to the text they were listening to, they did not really have to practise and maintain their ability to decode written words, which is an essential aspect of reading (Kintsch & Rawson, 2008). Combining reading and listening appears to be beneficial for students with reading challenges (Baron, 2021), but it is not necessarily a desired option for those who are already able to read silently on their own, without audio support (Lundberg, 2024). The present study suggests that listening to literary texts instead of having students read on their own is a prevalent feature of lower secondary language arts classrooms across Sweden and Norway. While this approach may allow for meaningful co-construction of the text and joint literary understanding, it also raises concerns, given that school-related reading has decreased in all subjects (Vinterek et al., 2022). Against this background, the finding that students were more often expected to listen to literary texts than read independently raises questions about whether Swedish and Norwegian students are given sufficient opportunities to practice, maintain, and develop their reading proficiency.

In this study, Norwegian students were given time to read books of their own choosing silently more often than Swedish students, implying that their teachers expected them to decode text. Although it has been difficult to establish that independent silent reading in itself fosters competent readers (Erbeli & Rice, 2022), it seems to exert a positive effect on older students (Grade 10) (Cuevas et al., 2014). We also know that if the silent reading is scaffolded, for example through "scaffolded silent reading (ScST)" where teachers support the individual reading through for example book selection strategies and individual reading conferences, the results of silent reading may improve (Reutzel et al., 2008). Furthermore, we know that a large number of Swedish and Norwegian students today do not read unless it is required (Jensen et al., 2019; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019); thus, it can be argued that teachers should allot more time for students' individual reading in school, particularly since attentive and focused reading of extensive literary texts has been found to be associated to cognitive perseverance and reading stamina (van de Ven et al., 2023). Moreover, there appears

to be a "fiction effect": According to Jerrim and Moss (2018) reading literature is more beneficial for young people's reading skills than reading other kinds of texts (e.g. non-fiction, magazines, and newspapers). Consequently, sustained silent reading of literature in school has the potential to foster good and sound reading habits among young readers. When students are encouraged to read texts that they find interesting and meaningful, they are given the opportunity to develop an identity as readers (Tegmark et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the present study contributes new knowledge on how Swedish and Norwegian lower secondary students read and listen to literary texts in language arts lessons. This kind of knowledge is valuable since it provides an empirical basis for evaluating and developing reading instruction. Analyses suggest that some instructional patterns were more common in one country than in the other, but differences were also identified between teachers within countries. As displayed in Table 1, the Swedish teachers were older and had stronger qualifications in language arts than their Norwegian colleagues. These conditions might have contributed to differences in the ways teachers engaged their students in reading and listening to literary texts.

The fact that reading sessions were generally shorter in Norway than in Sweden, and that Swedish teachers more often than their Norwegian colleagues interacted with students when reading literary texts aloud, can be assumed to have an impact on students' reading comprehension, which has been found to be an important reason why teachers in these countries use literature in their instruction (Nissen et al., 2021, 2026). However, the present study has only captured a limited part of each teacher's language arts instruction and of Swedish and Norwegian students' reading of literature, which calls for additional studies that examine a larger portion of students' school-related reading of literature. In language arts, students encounter varieties of texts other than literature, and teachers in all subjects can, and should, contribute to students' reading proficiency. Therefore, investigating reading practices in other subjects as well would be valuable. Although Swanson et al. (2016) found that time spent reading was similar in language arts and social sciences, this is not necessarily the case in Sweden and Norway. Moreover, the way teachers implement reading in their instruction can be expected to vary depending on students' age, and increased access to digital learning materials and audiobooks will affect the way students encounter literature and other texts. This trend, which we are now witnessing a rapid shift towards in Swedish and Norwegian classrooms, is likely to lead to less teacher-student interaction about text comprehension. The potentially changing relationship between modes of reading and forms of teacher-student interaction about text is worth paying attention to in future research.

Note

1. In Sweden this corresponds to grade 7, whereas in Norway it corresponds to grade 8.

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