

A broader view of pronunciation

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A note on the Swedish language and on the pupil's task ahead

In Swedish, the grapheme to phoneme correspondence is relatively high. The phoneme /i/ is typically represented by <i>, /y/ by <y>, /d:/ by <d>, and so forth. There are, of course, cases where more than one grapheme can be used to represent one phoneme, such as in the case of /o:/, <o> and <å>, or where spelling conventions determine that the same grapheme is used for more than one phoneme: /g/, /j/ and <g>. Irregular spellings are not uncommon, either. However, compared to for example English, the basis of the Swedish writing system is relatively regular which means that the orthographic system can be helpful for pupils attempting to acquire the phonological system, and vice versa.

Figure 1 illustrates the different challenges of someone learning to write in an L1 and an L2, with the help of the word <groda> (/gru:da/, frog). There are differences and similarities. One similarity is the likelihood that both learners know the meaning, they are familiar with a frog when they encounter one. A child learning a first language will typically acquire the phonological system well before it is time to conquer the orthographic system. For those learning a second language, especially newly arrived adolescents required to go through mandatory schooling at a high pace, both the phonological and the orthographic systems will be more or less new. In Figure 1, the yellow fields denote what new skill or information the learner needs to acquire. These are slightly different for the two learner types, and the difference is highlighted by a red square. While the tasks of learning the orthographic system and mapping the phonological system to the orthographic system are shared, the L2 learner also has to learn the phonological system, as well as the vocabulary. Utilising the high grapheme to phoneme correspondence of Swedish may thus be an asset for both the pupil and for the teacher of Swedish as a second language, and we hypothesise that this focus on the code level could work as a shortcut.

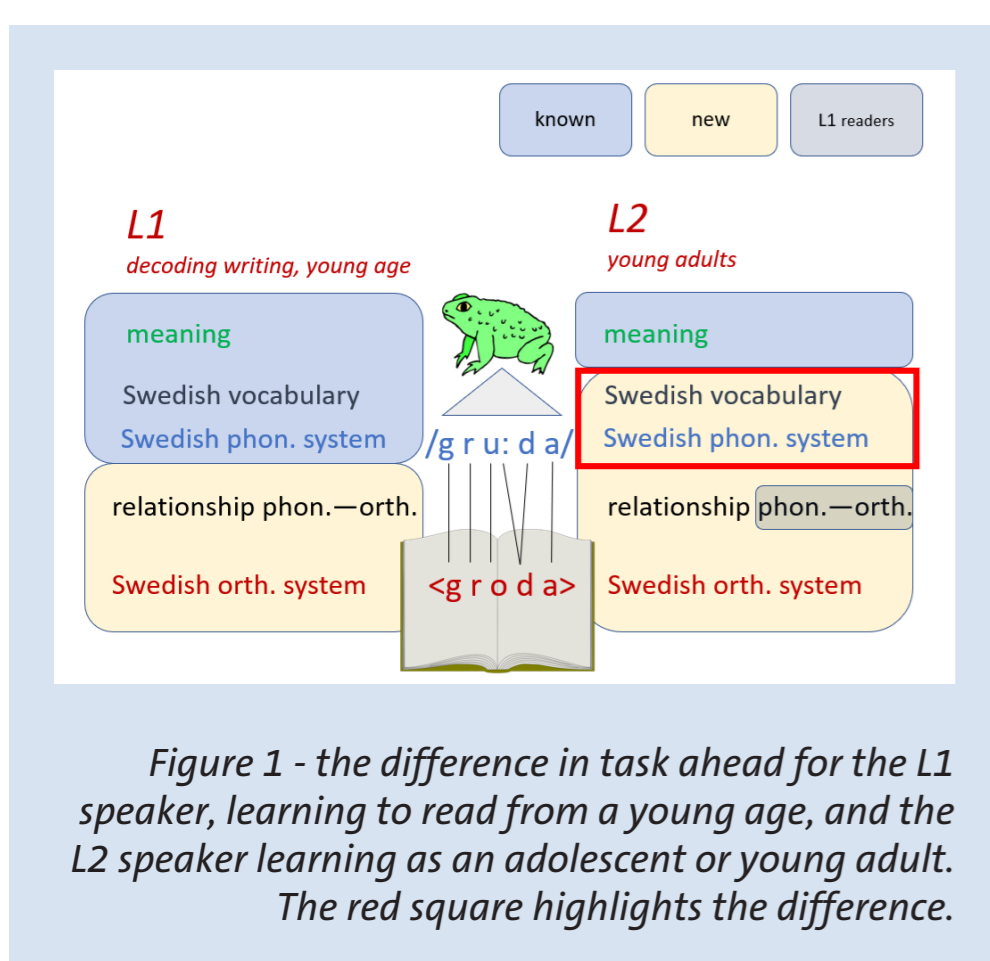


Figure 1 - the difference in task ahead for the L1 speaker, learning to read from a young age, and the L2 speaker learning as an adolescent or young adult. The red square highlights the difference.

From traditional pronunciation instruction to literarisation

Traditionally, pronunciation instruction involves articulation training and listening comprehension. Experience of working with 16–19 year old newly arrived pupils in Sweden shows that their basic literacy levels are low, even after three years of courses in Swedish as a second language. Memorising appears to be a technique often used for retention of word representation, but the lexical quality (cf. Perfetti 2007) of those words often appears to be lower than it seems on the surface.

Teachers of Swedish as a second language and Swedish for Immigrants regularly report that many of their pupils never acquire some of the phonological distinctions of Swedish, and that spelling is also affected as the corresponding orthographic distinctions are not acquired either. The same results are shown in diagnostic tests of newly arrived pupils, undertaken during the Intensivsvenska (Intensive Swedish) project.

When discussing pronunciation instruction with teachers of Swedish as a second language, focus is often placed on articulation training or on content rather than the code level (see figure 2). This is partly due to the demands on teachers to ensure that the pupils pass; the content level is seen as prioritized as it is easier to see how it should benefit passing a specific course. However, basic coding and decoding skills are necessary in order that pupils can become confident readers. If the code level is ignored, deficient coding abilities may in turn hamper the development of sight reading, and limit the amount of information that pupils can absorb from reading, as much of the energy will be taken up by the decoding efforts. This is in line with intervention results in Ven, Segers & Verhoeven (2019), where phonological specificity training positively affected the learning of L2 vocabulary. The intervention was especially beneficial in relation to the acquisition of words containing phonological contrasts not found in the participants' L1. We therefore hypothesize that focusing on the code level in its entirety will, in both the shorter and the longer run, benefit the acquisition of new vocabulary, as well as of the phonological system as a whole.

There are a number of types of exercises that meet these criteria, and in their most simple form these can be described as variations of dictation and read aloud tasks where regularly spelled nonsense words are used.

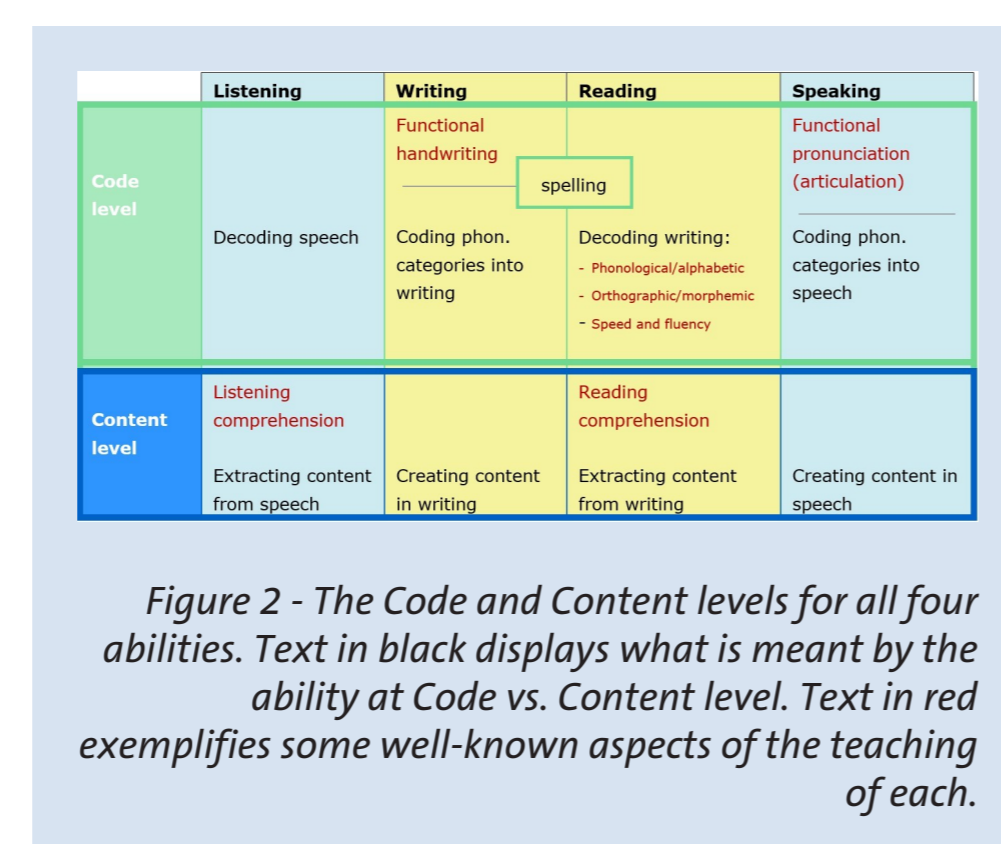


Figure 2 - The Code and Content levels for all four abilities. Text in black displays what is meant by the ability at Code vs. Content level. Text in red exemplifies some well-known aspects of the teaching of each.

Diagnosis: how do I know what my pupils need?

Within the project Intensivsvenska, we have conducted diagnostic tests on some 900 pupils between August 2018 and June 2021 (the tests are described in more detail in Riad & Forsberg 2019 and Riad & Lim Falk forthcoming). In these diagnoses, pupils' literarisation levels are tested through a series of dictation tasks, where nonsense words are read aloud and participants either transcribe the full word, transcribe one segment, or choose one of two possible orthographic transcriptions. Once the diagnosis is analysed, a profile for each pupil or group of pupils is produced and teachers will be able to use this to plan their teaching.

This diagnostic work partly builds on the 2018 in-class intervention conducted by Paula Grossman (see Grossman & Riad 2020 for a full description), where pupils received training focusing on different aspects of the Swedish sound system, especially the complementary distribution of long/short VC sequences within stressed syllables, on phonological awareness, on phonemic contrasts between short vowels, on basic morphology and on connections to orthography (Grossman & Riad 2020: 12).

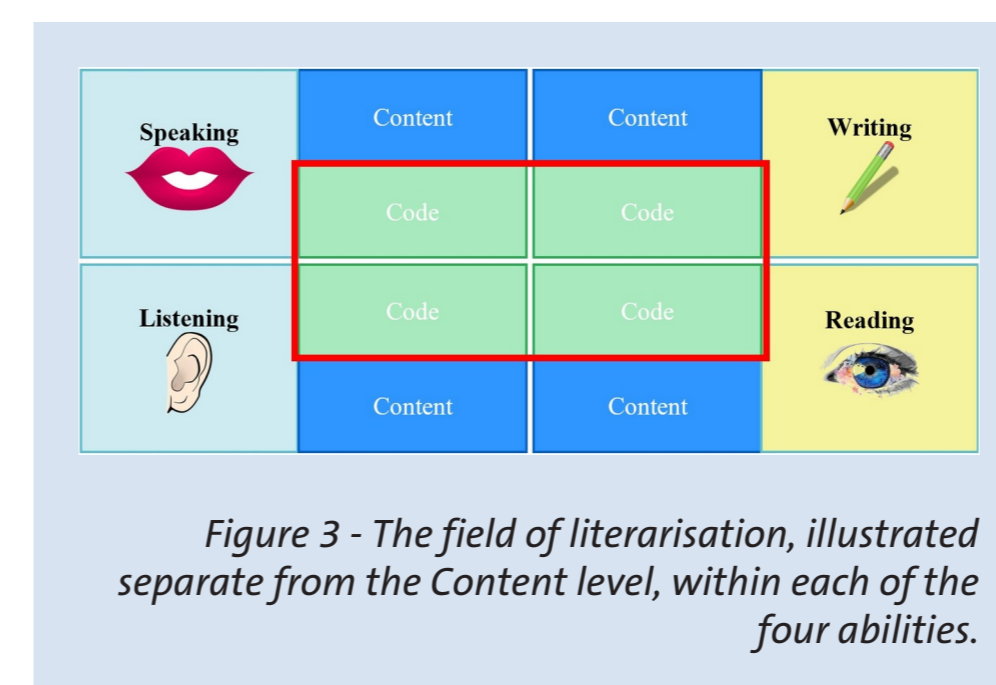


Figure 3 - The field of literarisation, illustrated separate from the Content level, within each of the four abilities.

Literarisation: what and how?

The basic literacy skills, that is, the coding and decoding abilities connected to reading, writing, listening and speaking together make up the field of literarisation.

In order to ensure that exercises are aimed at the code level rather than the content level, and to ensure that the extensive reading training is accessible to pupils (c.f. Castles et al. 2018), we suggest the use of nonsense words that are regularly spelled and in which a few main phonological distinctions are represented. This ensures control of the materials – and avoids memory effects or pupils using energy at content level during these exercises. The aim here is automatization at code level.

The goal is to ensure a good level of literarisation, i.e. a solid base at code level in terms of phonology and orthography, for pupils to be able to build on to achieve high lexical quality (Perfetti 2007), fluency of reading and the ability to comprehend and utilize the texts and language they encounter. Similarly, the pupils ultimately need to be able to produce comprehensive and meaningful language in writing and in speech. All this in a manner that ensures unnecessary energy is not spent at the code level, but is instead available at the content level.

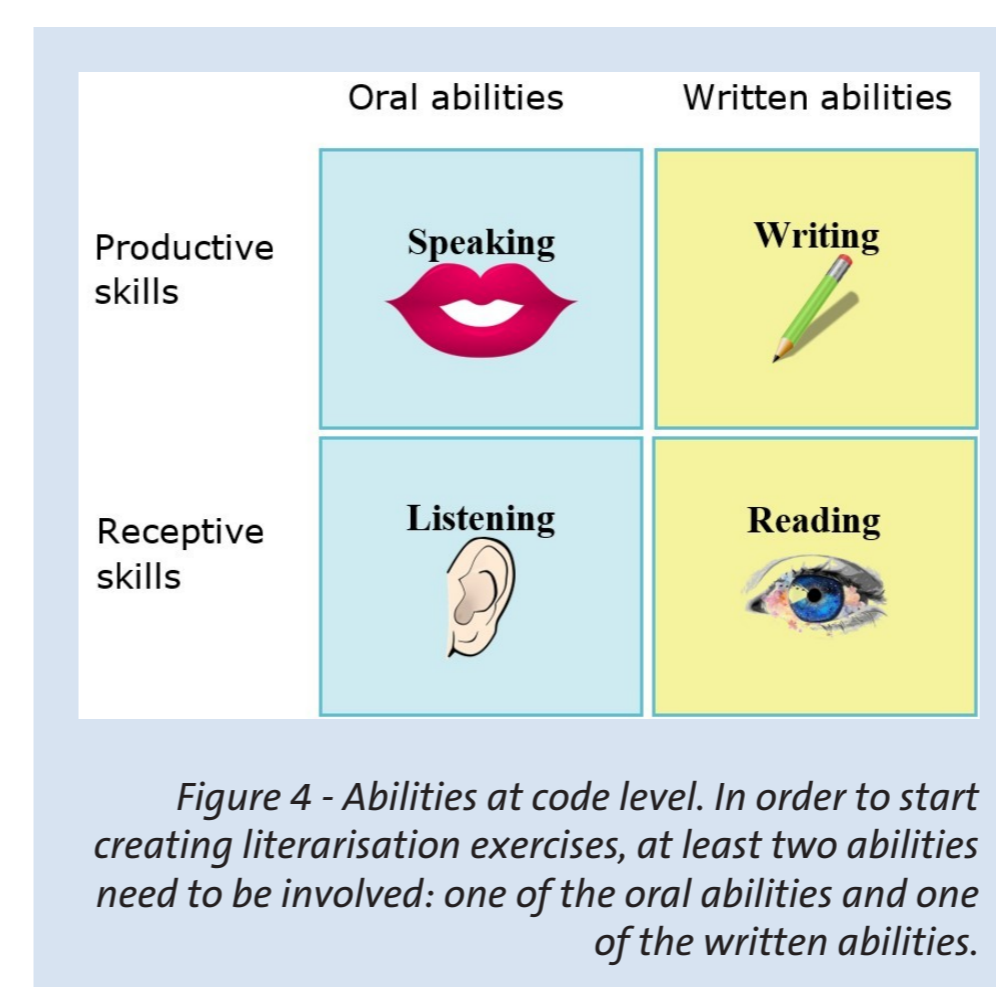


Figure 4 - Abilities at code level. In order to start creating literarisation exercises, at least two abilities need to be involved: one of the oral abilities and one of the written abilities.

What, then, are the basic principles behind literarisation in the classroom? In simple terms, at least two abilities (writing, reading, speaking and listening) need to be involved, in order that the exercises are truly at literarisation level, and not articulation, repeat-after-me or similar. This means that some type of decoding (of graphemes or phonemes) and some type of coding (of phonemes or graphemes) are necessary: one receptive, and one productive skill (see figure 4).

Literarisation: the way forward

The current research project, Samsas (Samtidig samverkan mellan forskare och lärare, Simultaneous collaboration between researchers and teachers, 2021-2022, funded by Områdesnämnden för humanvetenskap at Stockholm University), aims to develop the knowledge in the literarisation field, both theoretically and through practice. Teachers in Swedish as a second language, working with newly arrived pupils at three schools are involved in the research collaboration process.

The first phase, spring term of 2021, has involved preparation, through skills development for teachers and researchers (phonetic transcription, recording and analysis of pupils' speech, and the creation of classroom materials and activities). The second phase, starting in the Autumn term 2021 will involve classroom intervention led by the teachers, observed by researchers. During this term and Spring term 2022, materials and activities will be continuously created, tested and evaluated and the process will be documented by all participants. Diagnostic tests and other checks of pupils' progression will also be conducted, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of this type of training.

References

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