Initial literacy teaching in Sweden

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Reading – and the teaching thereof – has a long tradition in Sweden

- In the early 17th century it was decided that every Swede should learn to read. Success was by no means guaranteed.
- The vicar was responsible for his parish and the father of the house for his household. Every year the vicar gathered his parishioners for ‘exams’ (‘husförhör’). The vicar was obliged to keep a register.
- In 1842 parliament decided to start public schools (ages 7-12) and make each parish responsible; i.a., they had to provide a suitable room and an educated teacher.
- At first an entrance requirement was that the child could read, but this was soon changed.
What was meant by ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ in the early days?

- Read aloud a simple and well-known text, understanding not needed
- Read ‘by heart’ – recall important passages from Luther’s catechism (knowing his ‘explanations’ was all understanding you needed)
- Religious texts were the only ones available in many communities
- The use of teaching ‘writing’ in public school was debated – ordinary people had nothing to write about
- Writing was about correct spelling and ‘having a beautiful hand’
What about the teaching methods?

- Svedbom (1854) described three methods to teach reading:
  - 1. the *ABC* or *alphabet* method (common in Sweden and many other countries)
  - 2. the *whole-word* method (used in e.g., France and England)
  - 3. the *synthetic* method (used in e.g., Germany)

- Svedbom recommended the synthetic method for Swedish children – well suited for Germanic languages with a good letter-sound correspondence.
The 20th Century

- The synthetic method became standard in Swedish schools until the 1970’s.
- Attempts were made to introduce other methods, such as Hammer’s interest method (1906) using authentic texts based on the children’s vocabulary and natural interests:
  - …tries to absorb the good out of all methods without … confining itself to any of them. It’s goal is to change learning to read into a natural and entertaining activity for the seven-year-old.
- Primers contained a mix of facts and fiction and were written in phonetically simple language, although not always compatible with everyday language.
- Teachers’ Union commissioned Selma Lagerlöf to write a comprehensive textbook that would cover most subjects taught in the early years (The wonderful adventures of Nils, 1906-07).
Beskow and Siegvald: Would you like to read?
1970’s – ‘The Reading War’

- Top-down or bottom-up, that is the question.
- LTG – (Läsning på Talets Grund) – a language experience approach (Leimar, 1974) in 5 phases:
  - Conversation
  - Dictation of children’s created sentences
  - Elaboration/Analysis
  - Re-reading
  - Follow-up
- Whole class, small groups, individual work.
- Teachers created exercise materials and chose authentic texts to use alongside with the children’s own texts.
- Many researchers critical, as there was consensus about the importance of phonological processing abilities in ‘breaking the alphabetical code’.
- Comparative studies showed no substantial differences in performance between LTG and synthetic/phonics-based methods.
Is one method better than the other?

- The national curriculum (Lgr 11) does not recommend any teaching methods, only states the general aims and core contents of literacy teaching at different levels:

  - **Reading strategies for understanding and interpreting texts, as well as adapting reading to the form and content of texts**
  - **Strategies for writing different types of texts adapted to their typical structures and language features. Creating texts where words and pictures interact.**
  - **Simple forms of processing texts, such as subsequently going through their own texts and making clarifications.**
  - **Handwriting and using computers for writing.**
  - **Structure of language with large and small letters, full stops, question marks, exclamation marks, as well as spelling rules for frequently occurring words in texts closely related to pupils’ daily life.**
  - **The alphabet and alphabetical ordering.**
  - **The relationships between sounds and letters.**
Today

- General agreement that certain elements should be included in any method used to teach reading and writing.
- Most children seem to learn to read whatever method the teacher uses – as long as the teacher knows and believes in what she is doing and can motivate and stimulate her children.
- Methods used in Sweden today are often eclectic. Teachers work with phonics and formal exercises as well as meaningful, authentic texts to analyse.
- Reading and writing are taught in parallel – again it’s a matter of where to start. ‘Writing-to-read’ is successful in some areas.
- The difference is where you start – with single letters and simple words (bottom-up), with the children’s own language or with an authentic text (top-down).
- What has been sadly neglected is teaching of comprehension strategies, so in-service training is going on, involving both the NAE and private initiatives.
Förskoleklass – The preschool class

- New chapter in the national curriculum
- Every 6 year old has the *right* to get 525 hours teaching (optional, not compulsory)
- Building a bridge between kindergarten/preschool and the school
- The ‘Bornholm model’ is often used for developing children’s linguistic awareness
The Bornholm model

- Material based on research, developed byIngvar Lundberg and Ingrid Häggström, continuously revised
  - exercises in phonological awareness as well as other linguistic elements (e.g., morphology, semantics)
  - language games played 15-20 minutes daily
  - no exceptions, everyone participates
  - 10-12 pupils in each group
  - difficulty of exercises increases gradually over time
  - parts of the programme is repeated during 8 weeks in the fall, after that according to the children’s needs
Which word is the longest?

nyckelpiga
ladybug
tåg
train
A collection of Swedish primers
Example of a literacy programme: Learning to read at Grimstaskolan

- The Bornholm model in preschool class
- ‘Write-to-Read’ from school year 1
- Individual reading assignments and homework
- ‘Genre model’ – writing and reading (and discussing characteristics of) different types of texts
- Diagnostic approach to follow each pupil’s progress in language, reading and writing
- Intensive periods of training with a special needs teacher from year 1
The genre or circle model

’The aim of the genre model is to gradually – by means of explicit teaching – support the pupils in their efforts to develop not only their everyday language but also an efficient school language.’

Johansson och Sandell Ring (2012) Låt språket bära, genrepedagogik i praktiken. [Strengthen the language, the genre model in practice]
Something about Swedish spelling

- Swedish is a Germanic language with a rather shallow orthography, although with some notable irregularities. These may, certainly, cause spelling problems in initial teaching.

- The Swedish alphabet has 29 letters, if we include W (only used in names and foreign loanwords). Also Q, Z and, to some extent, X are unusual.
Vowels

- Nine vowels with different qualities that will decide how the preceding consonant is pronounced (e.g., KO, with a ‘hard’ sound [k]; KÄR, with a ‘soft’ sound [ch])
- Four ‘hard’: A, O, U, Å and five ‘soft’: E, I, Y, Ä, Ö
- Vowels can also be ‘long’/’closed’ or ‘short’/’open’ (pertaining to pronunciation) and stressed or not stressed. The stress decides whether there are single or double consonants after (see examples in our paper)
Consonants

- Consonant clusters are rather common, in the beginning and end of words, as well as in the middle (ex. SPJUT=‘spear’; KONSTNÄR=‘artist’, SJÄLVISKT=‘selfish’)
- Compound words are also common. Rather than ‘bicycle track’ we write CYKELBANA in one word
- Some phonemes (e.g., [sh], [ch], [j]) can be spelled in many different ways, much depending upon the origin of the word
Loanwords from foreign languages

- Loanwords are quite frequent, both from Latin and Greek long time ago, from German and French in the 17th and 18th centuries, and more recently from English. Old loanwords have usually ‘adopted’ Swedish spelling patterns, whereas recent loans tend to maintain their foreign spelling.
The teaching

• In initial literacy teaching most teachers using the synthetic method try to avoid words with complicated spelling patterns. Some common everyday words with irregular spelling are often taught as whole words.

• As regards spelling rules, teaching strategies vary a lot.

• The national curriculum (Lgr 11) mentions as part of the ‘core content in years 1-3’:

  ‘… spelling rules for frequently occurring words in texts closely related to pupils’ daily life’

  together with i.a.

  ‘The relationships between sounds and letters’