

Linguistically diverse students' perceptions of difficulties with reading and understanding texts in civics

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2022.02.11>

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Abstract

This study explores various difficulties reported by Swedish as a second language students in grade nine, when they read textbook texts in civics. Accordingly, this study provides examples of difficulties with texts in civics, viewed from the students' perspective. The method used is a combination of think-alouds and interviews. A four-field model is constructed and presented as the conceptual framework and analytical tool. This model has been a way of visualizing the complexity of difficulties with texts in civics. Findings show that all four components, a) literacy abilities, b) disciplinary literacy abilities, c) prior knowledge, and d) content area knowledge, illustrated in the four-field model, can be identified when students explain their difficulties with reading comprehension of texts in civics. Findings also indicate that the students' different types of difficulties with texts in civics could be explained by an interplay between the four components.

Keywords: *Second language, reading, textbook texts, think-aloud, civics learning, literacy development*

Introduction

In civics, reading texts in textbooks is one of the main resources for acquiring civics knowledge. Through reading and discussing the texts, students gain opportunities to develop their understanding about human rights and democratic processes, and to reflect on the values that characterize democratic societies. The intention is that students should receive support to improve their understanding about what it means to be an active and responsible citizen in a constantly changing society (Swedish National Agency of Education 2022). This means that opportunities for students to read and understand the content of texts in civics play a significant role in their civics learning.

According to statistics from the Swedish National Agency of Education (2021-2022), more than 26% of students in compulsory schools in Sweden are bilingual, with various linguistic and educational backgrounds.²⁵ Different types of difficulties that second-language (L2) students meet in relation to texts in civics have still not been extensively researched. Results from a thematic literature review based on ten studies focusing on students' civics learning indicate that although reading texts is central in civics, L2 students' possible difficulties with reading comprehension of civics texts have not been specifically explored in the studies (Rinnemaa, in press). These results also suggest that L2 students' perspectives on their difficulties with texts in civics do not receive significant attention in research. Thus, it can be argued that it is vital to include the perspectives of L2 students in research in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these difficulties. L2 students' possible difficulties in civics classrooms were considered primarily from the civics teachers' perspectives, based on the methods used in the studies (e.g., teacher interviews and classroom observations) (Myres & Zaman 2011, Dabach

²⁵ Bilingual students include those students who have acquired Swedish as their second language in addition to their first language(s). Swedish is the official language of society and school in Sweden.

2014, 2015, Jaffee 2016, Dabach & Fones 2016, Gibson 2017, Di Stefano and Camicia 2018, Lai 2018, Dabach et al. 2018). Interviews with L2 students in addition to teacher interviews are used in only two studies (Di Stefano & Camicia 2018, Myres & Zaman 2011).

From civics teachers' perspectives, L2 students' language proficiency and sufficient prior knowledge are highlighted as two prerequisites for successful reading comprehension of texts in civics (Myers & Zaman 2009, Deltac 2012). However, civics teachers often discuss L2 students' language proficiency in relation to reading demands of texts in civics, and seldom in relation to L2 students' possible language- and content-related difficulties with texts in civics. Based on the types of support provided by civics teachers in the ten studies, it can be concluded that the support mainly pertains to informing L2 students about the form-focused aspects of texts, such as semantic, syntactic, lexical, and rhetorical structures and genres of texts in civics. This is criticized by disciplinary literacy researchers like Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) and Moje (2008), who argue that learning about the language and structure of texts needs to occur within the context of particular texts. Reading is, therefore, best practiced within discipline-specific texts to support both language development and knowledge acquisition. Additionally, civics teachers' efforts to create opportunities for L2 students to bring various sources of knowledge to texts in civics, as a way to support their understanding, seem to suggest that other types of knowledge than learning about the form-focused aspects of texts are required for reading comprehension of texts in civics (Jaffee 2016, Di Stefano & Camicia 2018). The social, cultural, historical, and ideological contexts according to which the content of texts in civics is constructed need to be considered as well. Social context speaks of society's norms, historical context allows an understanding of the time frame in which events take place, and cultural context provides information about a society's way of life, including religion, traditions, customs, etc. (Dong 2017). Reading comprehension of texts in civics therefore requires L2 students' understanding of these points of reference, which are embedded in texts.

Against this background, it can be concluded that knowledge about L2 students' difficulties with reading comprehension of texts in civics is not one-dimensional. To gain a comprehensive understanding of L2 students' difficulties with texts in civics, the language-related aspects of these texts should be explored by considering L2 students' own prior experiences and perspectives, which can influence how they read, process, and understand texts in civics. With this in mind, the aim of this study is to explore what difficulties L2 students in grade nine, with various linguistic and educational backgrounds, report when they read textbook texts in civics. By highlighting L2 students' perspectives, this study aims to create a greater understanding of the types of difficulties that L2 students face in relation to texts in civics. This knowledge is required to be able to scaffold students' learning in classrooms where civics is taught. Thus, the research questions are:

- 1) What difficulties emerge when L2 students read and talk about textbook texts in civics?
- 2) How do L2 students explain the difficulties that they meet when reading textbook texts?

Previous research

To explore what kind of difficulties L2 students' face when reading texts in civics, it is relevant to study what reading abilities are required. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) argue that reading discipline-specific texts, which textbook texts in civics are categorized as, requires that students develop three levels of literacy abilities, i.e., basic literacy, intermediate literacy, and disciplinary literacy. Basic literacy is defined as abilities such as "decoding and knowledge of high-frequency words that underlie virtually all reading tasks", whereas intermediate literacy is described as literacy abilities "common to many tasks, including generic comprehension strategies, word meanings and basic fluency" (Shanahan & Shanahan 2008: 44). They also point out that disciplinary literacy is required when students move up to higher school grades (4-9) and meet more complex discipline-specific texts. The increased complexity of discipline-specific texts in social studies, including civics, is often discussed in relation to high levels of

abstraction, high degrees of lexical density, and discipline-specific language in texts (Halleson et al. 2018, Sandahl 2015).

As explained previously, the form-focused aspects of texts in civics cannot alone account for the difficulties that L2 students meet in relation to these texts. In her study, Olvegård (2014), by focusing on L2 students' difficulties with reading comprehension of textbook texts in history, shows that the high frequency of discipline-specific words in history texts is one of the main obstacles to L2 high-school students' understanding of the texts. Additionally, she observed that understanding discipline-specific concepts was dependent on the students' understanding of the historical and cultural context in which these concepts were embedded. Similarly, Kulbrandstad (1998) shows that L2 students' understanding of social studies texts is not merely dependent on the students' understanding of words. In their study on L2 students' understanding of disciplinary language of textbooks in civics, Walldén and Nygård Larsson (2022) show that the process of decontextualizing discipline-specific words in texts was less successful when L2 students tried to comprehend multiple abstract definitions of words, unrelated to the disciplinary content of texts.

In light of previous research, it may be concluded that disciplinary literacy is required in addition to the other levels (basic and intermediate) to meet the reading demands of texts in civics. The interest in disciplinary literacy first grew in the USA as a result of the particular difficulties that students faced when reading discipline-specific texts within various school subjects (Bennet 2011). McConachie (2010) defines disciplinary literacy as "the use of reading, reasoning, investigating, speaking, and writing required to learn and form complex content knowledge appropriate to a particular discipline" (p. 16).

Jaffee (2016) shows how texts in civics can be used to promote L2 students' reading abilities and civics learning at the same time. Civics teachers in Jaffee's study encouraged L2 students to ask questions like who, what, where, when why and how when discussing in what ways language could be used in their own texts to construct and communicate knowledge about civics themes like "what people do in democracy". The L2 students were then encouraged to compare their texts with texts written by experts within the field (e.g., textbook texts) to gain a better understanding of the ways language was used by experts to communicate civics knowledge in their texts. Similarly, Myers and Zaman (2009) show that reading civic texts and thinking aloud about the language- and content-related characteristics that make them typical of civics supported L2 students' reading comprehension of the texts. These researchers also report that the civics themes discussed in texts and L2 students' prior knowledge in relation to these texts were a determining factor for the students' reading comprehension, even if some parts of the texts were difficult for students to understand due to the high level of abstraction in them (Myers & Zaman 2009, see also Dabach & Fones 2016, Gibson 2017, Di Stefano & Camicia 2018).

Regarding the role of L2 students' prior knowledge for their civics learning, Dabach and Fones (2016) argue that in many cases it is difficult for civics teachers to view and evaluate L2 students' prior knowledge, since this is also acquired and developed outside school settings. Likewise, Jaffee (2016) argues those L2 students' prior knowledge matters, since L2 students, regardless of their linguistic and educational backgrounds, already possess civics knowledge and ideas, which might challenge the normative views that they encounter in texts in civics and/or in classroom discussions. In this case, it is important that civics teachers treat the discrepancies between L2 students' views and the views presented in texts as a resource for meaningful civics learning (Jaffee 2016).

One of the complexities with the term prior knowledge is that it contains various sources of knowledge, which could be considered useful for L2 students' reading comprehension of texts in civics. L2 students' language repertoires, as an integral part of the prior knowledge that is useful for their learning, have been repeatedly discussed in research (e.g., Cummins 2017, Gibbons 2016, Garcia & Wei 2015). In their study, Di Stefano and Camicia (2018) show how translanguaging results in L2 students gaining an in-depth understanding of concepts such as human rights and citizenship by reading related

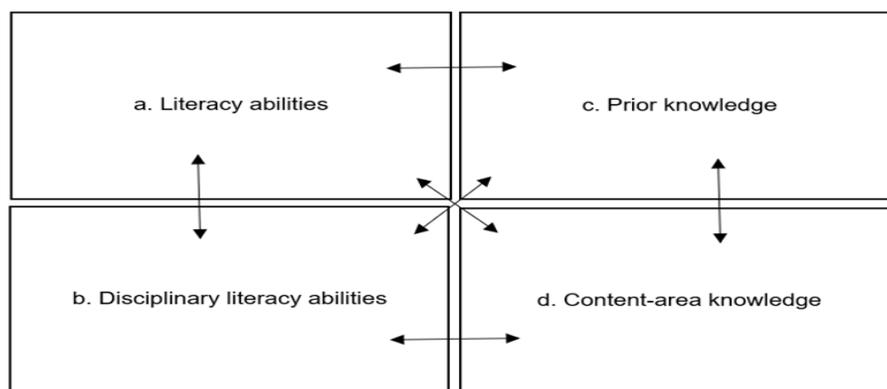
texts online, using both L1 and L2. On the other hand, L2 students' previous civics knowledge and life experiences have been shown to be significant for their understanding of discipline-specific texts in civics (Gibson 2017).

Having explained L2 students' difficulties with texts in civics from various perspectives in this section, three conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, these difficulties are not merely language-related. Secondly, all three levels of reading abilities (basic, intermediate, and disciplinary) are required and need to be developed to allow students to better cope with the reading demands of discipline-specific texts in civics and thereby increase civics learning. Thirdly, L2 students' prior knowledge plays a role in their reading comprehension of texts in civics and civics learning.

The conceptual framework

The above review of previous research indicates that L2 students need to use different types of abilities and knowledge to read and understand texts in civics. In my research, I have categorized these abilities and knowledge into four key components: a) literacy abilities, b) disciplinary literacy abilities, c) prior knowledge, d) content-area knowledge. Literacy abilities refer to basic and intermediate reading abilities, using Shanahan and Shanahan's (2008) definition given earlier. Disciplinary literacy abilities, in line with Moje's (2015) definition, refer here to reading and interpretation of texts to learn and construct civics knowledge. Prior knowledge includes various sources of knowledge that L2 students bring to texts in civics to understand them, whereas content-area knowledge refers particularly to civics knowledge that is to be learned by reading and understanding of texts in civics. Each of these components or the combination of two of them (e.g., literacy abilities and prior knowledge) have been discussed earlier in research. However, what is notable is that the interplay between the four components a-d and the role that such an interplay would have in supporting L2 students' reading comprehension and civics learning have not been studied before. The four-field model (Figure 1) is used as a conceptual framework here, with the aim of studying whether all four components a-d and their interplay with each other could be relevant to consider when studying different types of difficulties that L2 students encounter when reading texts in civics. The indicators a-d in this model do not designate any hierarchical order between the components and the two-headed arrows illustrate the interplay between them. The model is also used as the analytical tool in this study for two reasons. Firstly, to explore whether L2 students' difficulties with texts in civics could be explained by components a-d. Secondly, to study whether an interplay between components a-d would be identifiable when L2 students describe their difficulties in relation to texts in civics.

Figure 1: The four key components for supporting L2 students' content-area learning and literacy development.



This model is constructed based on the premise that texts in civics are meaningful disciplinary literacy practices that are socially, culturally, historically, linguistically, and ideologically constructed to support students' knowledge development in civics, which is facilitated by reading comprehension of texts in civics. The idea behind the model is inspired by the definition of literacy as involving "a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2004). By putting together this broad perspective on literacy with the goals in the civics curriculum, it makes sense to state that supporting L2 students' reading comprehension of texts in civics is crucial in helping them to achieve the goals of civics.

Method and design

The analysis is based on thirty-six individual think-aloud (TA) task completions combined with semi-structured interviews with eighteen L2 students in grade nine. The students were recruited from three schools located in two municipalities within a large city in Sweden. The three schools represent low, middle, and high socioeconomic status in relation to the parents' educational background, according to statistics provided by the Swedish National Agency for Education (SALSA 2020/21). It is important to mention that these statistics are used here with the aim of creating variety in the group of participants and accordingly to increase the reliability of the study, rather than to make any claims about the possible relationship between the students' sociocultural backgrounds and their perceived difficulties with texts in civics, as this relationship is not explored in this study.

Civics teachers in grade nine from each school, who had given their consent, were asked to select students, from among those who volunteered, who represent low, middle, and high grades in civics in grade nine. The researcher deliberately chose not to be notified of the participants' grades. Participation was voluntary, including the right to withdraw consent to participate at any time. When presented here, the names of the participants are pseudonyms and personal details have been changed to prevent identification. Prior to data collection, the Swedish Ethical Review Authority approved the project (Dnr 2021-03734).

The participants

The participants have been selected to create variation when collecting data. Nine girls and nine boys, aged 14-16, studying civics in grade nine in three different schools, participated in this study. Eleven of the participants were born in Sweden and acquired Swedish as their L2 during early childhood, whereas seven participants acquired Swedish as their L2 after migration to Sweden. The duration of the residency time in Sweden varies between two and ten years. The participants speak different first languages, including Persian, Dari, Portuguese, Arabic, Tagalog, Somali, Thai, Albanian and Spanish, in addition to English and Swedish.

Think-aloud as a method

TA is a method in which participants are asked to verbalize their thoughts as they occur in their immediate short-term memory when completing a prepared task (Ericsson & Simon 1998, Fonteyn, Kuipers & Grobe 1993). TA has been widely used in both L1 and L2 reading research with the aim of studying the mental processes of participants when performing a reading task (Kucan & Beck 1997). However, the current focus on engaging students in constructing meaning from texts in collaborative discussions seems to indicate a new direction for TA, as a method that is used to study the interaction between readers and texts from a broader perspective (Jahandar et al. 2012, Gunning 1996). When using TA, verbal reports, i.e., the participants' utterances during the task completion, are seldom used as the only source of data. Follow-up strategies like asking post-process questions (retrospective data) are

therefore used directly after the task completion to capture in-depth understanding of the participants' utterances during and after the task performance (Branch 2000, Van Someran, Barnard & Sandberg 1994, Charters 2003). For this reason, the data collection in this study is conducted in three steps, discussed next.

Think-aloud in three steps

In this study, the reading tasks consist of two texts from two different standard Swedish civics textbooks, used in grade nine (see Appendix A). Each TA was conducted with one student at a time on two different occasions in Autumn 2021, with intervals of two to three weeks between occasions. Each TA took approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in three consecutive steps where the participants (a) read and think aloud about the text, (b) summarize the text orally, and (c) answer the interview questions. The interview guide consists of fourteen main questions, divided into four categories, using the components a-d from the four-field model. Each main question is divided into sub-questions under each category (see Appendix B).

When studying literacy abilities, the students were asked questions like: What did you do in order to recognize the main parts of the text? What parts of the text were easier/more difficult to understand? Can you tell me what you did first when you received the text from me? Disciplinary literacy abilities were studied by asking questions like: What would you say is a typical text in civics? What knowledge do you think is necessary to read a typical text in civics? Do you read texts in civics differently compared to texts within other school subjects? The category prior knowledge was explored by asking students: What did you do when you did not understand some parts of the text? Did you recognize the civics topics discussed in the text from somewhere else? Finally, the category content-area knowledge was studied by asking: What did you learn from the text? What made the content of the text comprehensible/interesting to you? In what way do you think the knowledge you learned from the text would be useful to you? The participants' verbal reports from each TA were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The questions and excerpts have been translated from Swedish to English by the author.

Data analysis

The verbal reports were analyzed thematically, using the four-field model, and the results were organized into four themes: a) literacy abilities, b) disciplinary literacy abilities, c) prior knowledge, and d) content-area knowledge. The four-field model is used to explore whether the source of a number of difficulties that L2 students describe and give examples of could be explained by the four components a-d and their interplay with each other.

The first theme, literacy abilities, was studied by searching for verbal reports in which L2 students describe the language-related issues that made the reading comprehension of the texts difficult for them. When analyzing the verbal reports from the first step of TA, the focus was on the types of difficulties that caused most pauses during the process of reading, for instance when the participants asked the researcher about the meaning or the pronunciation of words in the texts. The analysis of the summaries focused on parts of the texts that were either omitted or well-explained by the participants in their recollection of the texts. The analysis of the interview answers focused on the responses in which the participants gave examples of difficult parts in the texts and explained what language elements made them difficult to understand.

The second theme, disciplinary literacy abilities, was studied by searching for verbal reports in which L2 students describe elements and characteristics in the texts that they considered to be typical of civics and made the texts difficult to understand. For instance, during the first step of TA, the students made comments about the high number of civics-specific words and the ambiguous pictures in the texts.

When analyzing the summaries, the focus was on whether civics-specific words were used in the participants' recollection of the texts. When analyzing the interview answers, the focus was on examples given by L2 students in which they described and made remarks on the typical characteristics of texts in civics. To support the participants, the researcher encouraged them to compare the text that they had just read with a text that they had recently read within another school subject. By comparing texts with each other, the participants could give some detailed examples about elements and characteristics in texts that made them civics-specific. For instance, in their comparison between texts in civics and texts in science, the participants mentioned the unclear structure of texts in civics as a typical element (e.g., the lack of headings).

The third theme, prior knowledge, was analyzed by searching for verbal reports in which the participants indicated that they brought various sources of knowledge to the texts. For instance, when thinking aloud, the participants explained that they guessed the meaning of some difficult words by associating them with similar words in other languages (e.g., English and their L1). The presence of prior knowledge was analyzed in the summaries by focusing on links that the participants said that they made when connecting the information in the texts with what they already knew about the main content of the texts. When analyzing the interview answers, the focus was on all sources of knowledge that the participants described as helpful in their reading comprehension of the texts. For instance, they mentioned that discussing voting with their family members helped them to understand the content of the texts better.

Finally, the theme content-area knowledge was analyzed by looking for verbal reports in which the participants gave examples of new knowledge that they learned from the texts. When analyzing the first step of TA, the focus was on the comments that the participant made about the civics themes discussed in the texts. For instance, the participants asked questions like "Is that really so?", referring to a specific civics theme in the text, mainly to confirm that they had understood it correctly. The analysis of oral summaries focused on facts, statistics, important information, and specific themes that the participants highlighted in their recollection of the texts. When analyzing the interview answers, the focus here was on the responses in which the participants described what new knowledge they learned from the texts, and what further civics knowledge they wished they could learn from the texts.

Results

The four-field model is used to study L2 students' various difficulties with texts in civics. The results are organized into four themes that illuminate what difficulties L2 students pinpoint in relation to texts in civics, and how they explain the difficulties. The themes include: a) literacy abilities, b) disciplinary literacy abilities, c) prior knowledge, and d) content-area knowledge. The first theme, literacy abilities, is organized into four sub-themes, presented next.

a. Literacy abilities

When L2 students were asked to pinpoint the difficult parts in the texts and explain why they perceived them to be difficult, four categories were repeatedly discussed by them, including difficult words, text length, text density, and hidden clues.

Difficult words

The analysis of the participants' verbal reports indicates that the main cause for the pauses that the participants made during the first step of TA was the presence of difficult words in the texts. The difficult words are divided into civics-specific terms and everyday words with special meanings in the texts. These are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The list of difficult words reported by the participants. The original words in Swedish are translated into English by the author.

Civics-specific words	Everyday words
Electorate	Majority/minority
Resident	Single/separated
Turnout in an election	Insult
General election	Disability
Parliament	To a large extent
Governance	Foreign
City council	Domestic
The kingdom	Requirements
Monarchy	Cherish
Censorship	Involves
Tax reduction	
Statutory	

The participants describe difficult words as words that require “loads of explanation” and cannot be easily understood by a single synonym. They often call such words “heavy words” (abstract words) and give terms like democracy and governance as two examples. The participants explain further that pauses due to the difficult words disrupt their concentration and influence their general understanding of the texts negatively. For instance, Emma, one of the participants says, “If I read a word like democracy, a word that I know and then comes governance, which I don’t know, if I stop and concentrate on this word, then I’ll forget what I actually read so far”. Emma explains also that pausing infrequently during the process of reading is an indication of being “smart”.

Moreover, the participants report that searching for the precise meaning of abstract words is a time- and effort-consuming process and does not always result in an in-depth understanding of the texts. Several participants express frustration about the constant feeling of not being able to understand the texts despite the time they spend searching for the meaning of words. For instance, Adam explains, “[...] it feels weird, you really want to know what the word means, but you don’t find the exact meaning [...] It takes so much time from you”. Most students report that they mainly employ Google and online dictionaries to find the meaning of difficult words, but the variation in the explanations provided by such digital resources makes it difficult to interpret the precise meaning of the words and causes misunderstandings. In this regard, the participants underline repeatedly the importance of their civics teachers’ explanations of the words. Jens explains, “My civics teacher explains the word to me; she is educated and she, unlike Google, knows exactly which meaning of the words we need to learn”. Julia, like Jens, prefers her civics teacher’s explanations, but she also explains that digital resources are still her first option, since one teacher alone cannot cover all students’ needs in a classroom where many students ask for support. Julia argues further that the restrictions about the use of mobile phones and limited access to the internet in some classrooms worsen the problem since she cannot look up the words anywhere.

Text length

The difficulties with long passages are often discussed in relation to the number of sentences, the number of difficult words and the complexity of the selected civics themes in the texts. Complex civics themes are explained by the participants as themes that they find difficult to relate to or themes that

they know little about. This is noticeable in the students' oral summaries when the content of long passages is severely compressed or omitted in their recollection of the important parts of the texts. However, L2 students report that when they find the main themes in the long passages interesting and relevant, they experience them as less difficult to understand. One example is a long passage in Text 1 giving information about tax reduction and how it affects family finances. When reflecting on this passage, Simon says: "I think most people are interested in knowing how political decisions affect their own life, because it's about you and your family. I think it's easier to understand when it's about your own life".

Text density

The difficult parts in the two texts are sometimes explained by the participants as parts containing a lot of information. However, students may also have difficulties when the text is simplified by reducing the amount of information provided and using more basic sentence structures. According to the participants, the simplified content provides them with little information about important concepts that they need to learn from the texts. Victoria sets this perspective in relation to the civics curriculum and argues that the simplified content in the texts rarely corresponds to the high requirements in the civics curriculum in which several goals are expected to be fulfilled by the students. She argues:

The thing is that you can't have a curriculum that is so demanding and requires that you know many things, while the texts are so simple. You'll learn simple things from simple texts, and you'll think simply accordingly. [...] When texts get more advanced, there will of course be problems for some students, but I hope there would be alternatives for everyone.

Several participants, like Victoria, express a wish for a varied selection of civics texts instead of "one text for all" which according to them is "unfair" to those students who wish to learn more about civics themes from texts in civics.

Hidden clues

Another difficulty reported by the participants is when the meaning of the difficult words is not explicitly explained in the texts. Instead, the participants need to find the clues, which according to them are often "hidden" in the texts, to guess what difficult words mean. However, based on the verbal reports, it is notable that L2 students utilize the existing clues in the texts to varying degrees. While some participants are aware of the clues in the texts and use them consciously to understand the texts, the other students do not pay much attention to them. The following excerpt from Text 1 is provided to exemplify what such a clue could look like: Sweden is one of the world's democracies, with a monarchy where the king does not have any power. Those students who did not know the meaning of monarchy, but used clues like king and power, guessed what monarchy meant and continued with their reading, while the meaning of monarchy remained obscured for those students who did not pay attention to the given clues in the text and got stuck on the word. Moreover, the participants report that they use semiotic resources like images, speech bubbles, and text boxes in the texts for guessing what the texts are about.

b) Disciplinary literacy abilities

To study L2 students' difficulties in relation to texts in civics, the researcher asked the students to pinpoint some characteristics and elements that they found to be typical of texts in civics and explain why they made the reading comprehension of the texts difficult. They were then encouraged to compare the text that they had just read with a text in another school subject that they remembered. In their comparisons, most of the participants chose to compare the texts in civics with texts in biology or other science subjects. The participants point out four typical characteristics of texts in civics: a) the

choice of images and their placement in the texts, b) the high number of civics-specific words, c) the structure of the texts, and d) the use of informal and simple language in the texts. Most students describe the images in biology texts as “straightforward”, whereas some of the images in the two civics texts are described as “misleading” and “ambiguous”. The ambiguous images are the ones where the link between the images and the information in the texts is not easy to recognize, either because of the placement of the images in the texts, or because there is some doubt as to what exactly the images illustrate. One of the participants, Mikaela, says: “In biology there is one picture for one thing in each paragraph, but in this text [Text 1], you need to read between the lines to figure out what these pictures tell us about”. For instance, the only image in Text 2, illustrating a meeting point where people are gathered to exchange information prior to an election, caused misunderstanding among the participants. They thought that the picture illustrated a polling station where people go to vote. The participants explained that they misunderstood this picture because they had never seen a polling station in real life.

The second typical element in civics texts is the high number of civics-specific words, which are in bold print in the texts. The participants report that although they know what some of the civics-specific words in the texts mean, they do not always use them correctly in their own language production.

A third characteristic of texts in civics, according to the participants, is a lack of headings and introductory sections to help the reader to navigate the texts and follow the information presented in them. This makes texts in civics difficult to understand in comparison to texts in biology, for example, as it is difficult to discern how different parts of the text relate to each other. Daniel uses Text 2 as an example and suggests, “It starts with a sort of introduction, but it should contain more information [...] The introduction should be like an abstract, so to speak”.

The fourth typical element of texts in civics is the use of informal and simple language. The simplicity of the language is explained by the participants as the sparing use of conjunctions between the sentences in texts in civics, which make them less coherent and more difficult to follow. The informal language of texts in civics is explained as language that is informative and narrative, but seldom argumentative.

c) Prior knowledge

The results show that the participants’ level of prior knowledge in relation to the content of the two texts has a crucial role in their reading comprehension of the texts in civics. The participants report that the civics knowledge acquired from earlier school grades and classroom discussions, and general knowledge learned within other school subjects like history and Swedish, are useful assets for understanding the content of the texts. Their own life experiences are also highlighted as an asset for their understanding of the texts. However, the students’ life experiences include not only their self-experienced life from the time they lived in or visited other countries including their parents’ country of origin, but also the life experiences that their parents and relatives pass on to them through their narratives. Amalia, for instance, refers to her experiences from the time she visited her parents’ country of origin and argues about different understandings of the word democracy. She says:

[...] in my parents’ home-country, democracy is just a word, it’s not real. [...] Women for example, they don’t have many rights there, they only do what men tell them to do. It doesn’t mean that the women approve of this, but they don’t have much choice, because there is no real democracy.

When it comes to L2 students’ language repertoires as a part of their prior knowledge, most of the participants report that they mainly use Swedish and English when they read texts in civics. One reason given by them is that the meaning of some civics-specific terms is also difficult to understand in their L1. Several participants report that they mainly use their L1 at home when working with school assignments, but seldom during classroom activities at school. Daniel explains: “It’s different when I’m

at home and speak my first language with mom and dad when we talk about school stuff. Swedish is my language at school and L1 [the name of the language has been removed] is my home-language". Another type of prior knowledge that the participants find useful for their understanding of the texts is information retrieved from TV news, newspapers, and social media.

The lack of intercultural perspectives in texts is another difficulty raised by the participants in this regard. They explain that reading and discussing other forms of government within other cultural and social contexts would not only optimize their civics learning, but also would provide them with meaningful opportunities to bring their own knowledge and experiences to the texts in order to understand them. Jens, for instance, explains: "My classmates need to know that not all children in the world live as comfortably as we do in Sweden. The welfare system is different and there are children who live in poverty, but we seldom read about them". Amalia, like Jens, communicates her interest in knowing about other forms of government, but she also raises concern about civics teachers using students as what she calls "cultural ambassadors" in the civics classroom when discussing complex civics themes such as world conflicts. She argues further that although knowledge exchange between the students in civics classrooms would expand their civics understanding, civics teachers need to consider that talking about civics themes like war could engender feelings of discomfort for those students who have experienced it in real life. Amalia suggests that the knowledge exchange in the civics classroom needs to be done delicately.

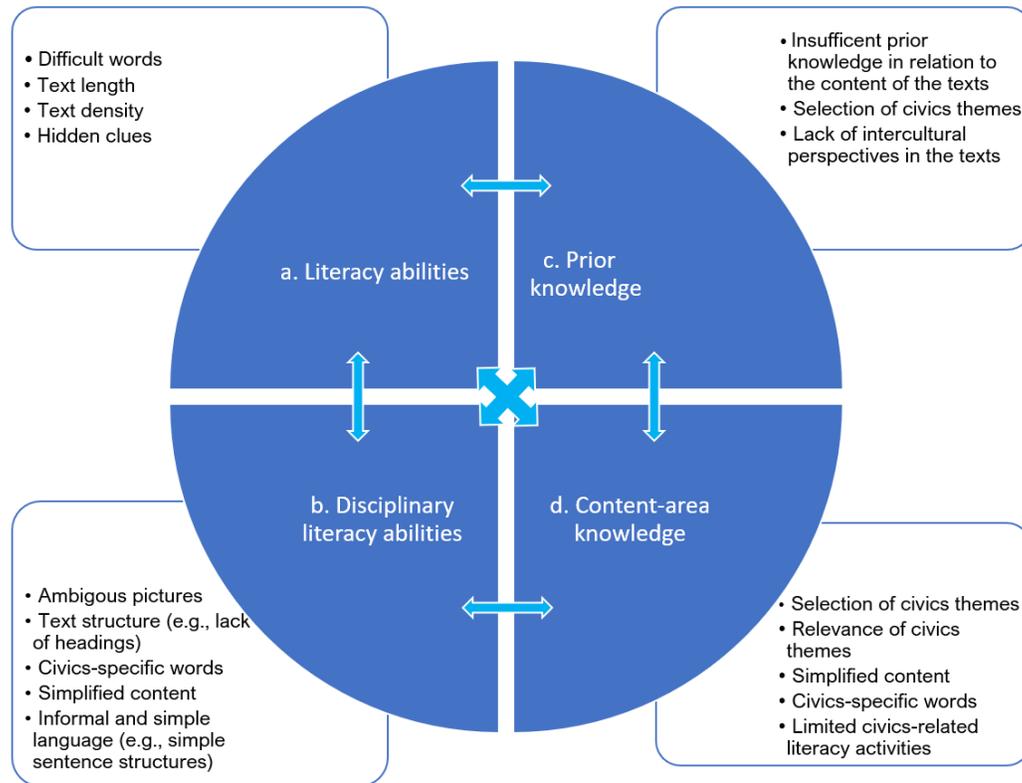
d) Content-area knowledge

This final component is studied by looking for verbal reports in which the participants describe new knowledge that they learned from the two texts. Learning new vocabulary is underlined by the participants as the most beneficial knowledge acquired from the two texts. The participants explain that learning new vocabulary is meaningful for understanding of similar texts in civics and other school subjects. At the same time, the participants raise concerns about the limited opportunities for using civics-specific words in meaningful contexts. They express a desire for activities such as writing assignments and oral presentations that enable them to learn and practice the discipline-specific language of civics. Emma says:

We need to learn the exact language, a sharp language that shows that you are smart. Instead of writing and explaining like ten lines to argue about a simple thing, you just use the correct word and say what you mean, just like an expert.

Moreover, the participants explain that they learn more from texts in civics when they find the civics themes discussed in them relevant and interesting. Jens, for instance, argues that the students need to realize that the civics knowledge retrieved from the texts not only helps them to pass exams at school, but it also equips them with useful knowledge for life. He explains: "You can get an F [fail] in civics at school, but come on, how on earth are you going to manage your life with an F in civics?" Benjamin, unlike Jens, finds the information about voting procedures in one of the texts irrelevant and says, "What do I do with this knowledge about voting? I'm only fifteen and I can't even vote yet."

An overview of the results is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Overview of the results.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore what difficulties L2 students in grade nine described when reading texts in civics. The results indicate that L2 students, both individually, and with support from their civics teachers, cope with various types of language- and content-related difficulties that reading and understanding texts in civics entail (cf. Economou 2015). Based on the results all four components, a) literacy abilities, b) disciplinary literacy abilities, c) prior knowledge, and d) content-area knowledge are apparent when L2 students describe their difficulties with reading comprehension of texts in civics. The results also indicate that difficulties with texts in civics can be explained by several components that are dependent on each other, rather than by any individual component. One example is the difficulties with words in the texts. Although difficult words are primarily categorized under the component of literacy abilities, the results show that in-depth understanding of the meaning of the words, especially those words that L2 students call “heavy words” (abstract words), is dependent on the students’ understanding of the content-area knowledge embedded in them (see also Walldén & Nygård Larsson 2022). The results also indicate that an understanding of these difficult words requires that L2 students activate and use their prior knowledge to understand the political, social, and cultural references that the words in the two texts receive their meanings from. The subject of difficult words, including civics-specific words, recurs when L2 students explain their difficulties with learning new knowledge from the texts and when they describe the characteristics in the texts that make them typical of civics. One conclusion that could be drawn here is that understanding the difficult words in civics texts requires an interplay between all four components, a, b, c, and d, since looking up the meaning of single words outside the context of the texts and without activating preunderstanding about the points of reference

in the texts proved to be less useful for L2 students' reading comprehension of the texts, according to these students. This is mirrored in verbal reports where L2 students express their frustration with not being able to understand the texts despite their efforts at finding the precise meaning of the words.

Moreover, the interplay between the components a, b, c, and d may be identified in the analysis of the verbal reports where L2 students reflect on language-related difficulties with the civics texts. The results indicate that L2 students' prior knowledge and their previous experiences and perspectives on how texts are structured are also significant to how they experience the level of difficulty in the texts. This is mirrored when the students discuss the elements in the texts that make them typical of civics and accordingly make the texts difficult to learn new knowledge from. The presence of the components of literacy abilities, disciplinary literacy abilities, and prior knowledge is notable in the ways L2 students utilize the existing clues such as images, speech bubbles, and word explanations embedded in the texts as resources to understand the texts as a whole. It can be argued that the language-related difficulties in the two texts become a greater hindrance to L2 students when they also have difficulty connecting the new information in the text to what they already know about the content by using clues in the text. When this happens, L2 students may easily become preoccupied with searching for the meaning of single words, hoping to gain an overall understanding of the texts. This, in turn, carries the risk that L2 students treat the civics texts as a means for learning vocabulary and not as a meaningful context for learning civics. This may be seen in the interviews when L2 students report that learning new vocabulary is one of the main benefits of reading texts in civics.

Furthermore, the interplay between the component's literacy abilities, disciplinary literacy abilities, prior knowledge, and content-area knowledge is also apparent when L2 students explain that they often have a general understanding of civics-specific words, particularly when they recognize the words from other contexts, but they cannot always use the words correctly in their own language production (e.g., oral presentation and writing assignments) when discussing civics themes. L2 students therefore express a wish for meaningful disciplinary literacy activities that enable them to practice and develop a civics-specific language to make their standpoints clear when arguing about civics themes.

In addition to difficult words, another example of where an interplay between the four components could be recognized in L2 students' explanation of difficulties with texts is when they reflect on the simple language, simple text structure, and the simplified content of the texts as being obstacles to their reading comprehension of the texts. In contrast to previous research, indicating that difficulties with texts are mainly caused by the difficult language used in them (e.g., Myers & Zaman 2009, Deltac 2012), the results in this study show that the simple language and the simplified content in the texts are also problematic for L2 students' reading comprehension. Simplified content and simple language (simple sentence structures) in the two texts seem to provide the students with limited knowledge with which they can develop their civics learning and improve their disciplinary literacy abilities (see also Jaffee 2016, Dabach 2015). This is mirrored in the verbal reports in which learning the discipline-specific language of civics and learning new knowledge from the texts are often associated by L2 students with being smart and competent. Emma's use of words like "sharp" and "expert" to define the language of civics could point to this.

Finally, the students' references to simplified content in the texts, the lack of intercultural perspectives, and the selection of unfamiliar civics themes, indicate that students' difficulties may arise from the interaction between the components of disciplinary literacy abilities, prior knowledge, and content-area knowledge, rather than from any single component. L2 students explain that including an intercultural perspective in the texts would not only provide them with opportunities to deepen their civics understanding of issues like voting and political decisions by comparing Sweden with other countries, but it would also create opportunities for them to exchange knowledge and experiences with each other in civics classrooms using their prior knowledge. This may be seen in Amalia's reflection

about different understandings of democracy, drawing on her experiences from visiting her parents' country of origin and reflecting on women's position in society. In this regard, Amalia's reasoning should not be ignored when she argues that the knowledge exchange between the students in civics classrooms needs to be approached delicately to protect the students' integrity.

To sum up, it can be argued that the types of prior knowledge that L2 students activate and bring to the texts to understand them is important when developing strategies to support L2 students' reading comprehension of texts in civics. The fact that L2 students in this study do not consider their L1 as an asset for reading comprehension of texts needs to be considered. During the interviews, there were several occasions where the students drew on their L1 in their conversations about the meaning of the difficult words with the researcher. As a result, the students' reasoning about the meaning of the words became more nuanced and self-reflexive, and they put the words into a context that was comprehensible to them. Thus, it can be concluded that L2 students need teacher instruction and support with the process of activating their prior knowledge when working with texts in civics.

Conclusion

Based on the results, it is argued that all four components: a) literacy abilities, b) disciplinary literacy abilities, c) prior knowledge, and d) content-area knowledge, illustrated in the four-field model, need to be in interplay with each other to support L2 students' reading comprehension and civics learning. The four-field model has been a way of visualizing the complexity of difficulties with texts in civics, as described by L2 students. The model has shifted the focus away from trying to determine whether the difficulties with texts in civics are caused by individual factors like L2 students' insufficient language proficiency and limited prior knowledge. Future research could study the ways through which the interplay between the components a-d is manifested in civics teachers' support to their L2 students when working with texts in civics. Finally, it is worth adding that the findings from this study cannot necessarily be generalized nor is the aim to provide a holistic picture of all L2 students' difficulties with reading and understanding texts in civics. However, the findings from this study could have implications for civics teachers, and possibly for teachers of other subjects, especially in instructional settings where teaching takes place in students' second language.

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Appendix A

Interview guide

Literacy abilities

1. Was it easy for you to read the text in Swedish?
2. In what way do you think reading this text can improve your Swedish language and reading ability? (Give some examples!)
3. What did you do in order to recognize the main parts of the text?
 - What parts were easier to understand?
 - What made it easy, do you think?
 - What parts were more difficult to understand?
 - What made it difficult?
 - What parts of the text sparked your curiosity? Why? (Explain!)
4. What did you do first when you received the text from me?
 - Did you, for example, look at the title, the pictures, the questions?
 - Did you find the pictures and the reading comprehension questions helpful for your understanding of the text? Could you see some connections between the pictures and the content?
 - If no, what other alternatives would you prefer to have instead?
 - If yes, in what ways did they help you to understand the text?
 - Did you set a goal with your reading at the beginning?

Disciplinary literacy abilities

5. If you compare the text that you just read with another text, for example a text that you read in Swedish class, what would you say is different between these two texts?
 - Would you read them differently, do you think?
 - If, yes, can you describe how you would do it? (Give some examples!)
6. What would you say is a typical civics text, according to you?
 - Is the text you just read a typical civics text?
 - If yes, can you give some examples that make the text a typical civics text?
 - In what ways are the pictures and the questions typical of a civics text, do you think? Would you choose other pictures and questions if you got to decide?
7. What knowledge do you think is necessary to have in order to read a typical civics text?
 - Is it important to know all words in the text?
 - What words in the text were more difficult than others?
 - What did you do to understand the meaning of the words you just gave as examples?
 - Do you find any clues in the text that might help you to find out what these words could mean?
 - Are there any other ways you can find out what the words mean in case you didn't have access to a dictionary/Google Translate?

Prior knowledge

8. How does what you learned from the text fit with what you already knew about the topic discussed in the text?
 - Did you recognize the topic discussed in the text from somewhere else? (Give some examples!)
 - From civics lessons at earlier grades? Which grade?
 - From other school subject (e.g. mathematics or Swedish)?
 - Teachers' explanations in the classroom?
 - Classroom discussions?
 - School assignments?
 - Discussions at home with your family members?
 - Discussions with other adults or peers outside home (e.g., at your sports club)?
 - Your own experiences from living in another country/community?
 - Reading about the topic in a newspaper or on the internet?
 - Hearing people discussing the topic/similar topics on social media?
 - Which of the resources you just mentioned did you use most when you read the text?
9. The text you just read was about democracy. Have you heard this word before?
 - If yes, was it described/discussed in the same way as it was in the text you just read or was it different? (Explain!)
 - In what way do you think that what you already knew about democracy helped you to understand the text you just read?
10. What did you do when you didn't understand some parts of the text?
 - Did your knowledge from other languages that you know help you to understand those parts? (Give some examples!)
 - What other knowledge do you think helped you to understand the text?

Content area knowledge

11. What did you learn from reading the text?
 - Did you miss anything in the text that you would like to know more about but the author didn't write about? (Give some examples!)
12. What made the content of the text comprehensible, do you think?
13. What made the content of the text interesting, do you think?
14. In what way do you think the new civics knowledge that you learned from the text might be useful to a young person like you?
 - For example when you discuss the topic with someone (e.g., family members or friends)?
 - When doing your schoolwork?
 - When you need to make a decision?
 - When you need to make your standpoint clear when discussing the topic in a text or when you talk to people about it?

The exit question:

I will now show you a model that I have drawn and you can tell me whether you think some of these boxes can be connected to each other. Each box shows an ability or knowledge that we need and use when we read a new text. Think about which of them are important to you when you read a new text in civics. Which of them do you need in order to understand the text? Can you mix some boxes together?

Do you want to remove some of the boxes? (for example if you think they are not so useful). Do you want to add your own box?

Reading the text in Swedish and recognizing the different parts of the text. 	Using what is already known about the topic in <u>order to</u> make meaning of the text. 
Recognizing the civics-specific words. Reflecting on the structure and language of the text. 	Learning the new knowledge. Reflecting on how the new knowledge can be useful to me. 

Note: Each box received a color to make it easier for the students to refer to them during the interviews.

Appendix B

Information about the two texts used in think-aloud

In the selection of the texts, two items of core content in the civics curriculum in years 7–9 were considered: (1) *Rights and the judicial system*, aiming to support students' understanding about democratic freedom and legal rights, and (2) *Decision-making and political ideas*, aiming to increase student' familiarity with citizens' opportunities to affect political decisions (The Swedish National Agency of Education, 2018)²⁶. Both texts are approximately one A4 page long and *democracy* is the main theme in them.

Text 1 is a part of a chapter titled *The Political System* in a textbook called *Utkik* [Look out], published by Gleerups (2014).²⁷ The text has a layout that is similar to a newspaper article, including three columns, each starting with a question that also serves as a subheading. The text provides the reader with basic information about the forms of government in Sweden, freedom of speech, and how political decisions affect citizens' daily lives. The semiotic resources in the text consist of three images, placed at the end of the text, illustrating a plate of food, paper money, and a portrait of two children. There are six key concepts that are in bold print in the text: *democracy*, *constitution*, *monarchy*, *governance*, *represents*, and *legal rights*. The explanation of these concepts is often embedded in the sentence that follows. One example is the definition of *democracy*: *In Sweden we have democracy. In our form of government, all public power proceeds from the people*. In addition to content-specific words, there are also several everyday words with specialized meanings such as *involves*, *cherish*, *insult*, *proceed*, and *reduction*, which are not explained in the text. Moreover, the passages in the text mainly consist of short main clauses with very few conjunctions combining the sentences. The main themes are either explained or described in these passages. There are no passages in the texts where the main themes are presented by arguing, comparing, or contrasting, which makes it difficult to indicate where shifts in meaning appear between the passages in the text.

²⁶ This curriculum was revised in 2022. Skolverket (2018). *Kursplanen för grundskolan: Lgr18*. [The Swedish National Agency for Education. Curriculum for elementary school]. <https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/laroplan-och-kursplaner-for-grundskolan/kursplaner-for-grundskolan>

²⁷ Gleerups Education provides textbooks, digital learning tools and course literature within various school forms, from preschool to university. For more information, see <https://www.gleerups.se/>

Text 2 comes from another textbook in civics called *Utkik* [Look out] published by Gleerups (2020), from a chapter titled *Democracy in Sweden*. Although this textbook has the same title as the first textbook, the content in it is completely different, and it has been updated in accordance with the current civics curriculum (2022). The main purpose of this text is to inform readers about the process of election in Sweden and voting as a democratic right. The organization of this text differs from Text 1. The text starts with a short introduction and the only image in the text is placed at the beginning of it, illustrating a meeting point where people gather to exchange information prior to the election. Symbols from four different political parties are visible as well. There are also two text boxes and one speech box in the text, containing four reading comprehension questions and a summary of the main themes. Unlike Text 1, Text 2 contains a variety of passages in which some of the main themes are presented by explaining, listing, and comparing. Like Text 1, Text 2 consists of several main clauses with few conjunctions. There are six key civics-specific concepts in the text and their explanation is embedded in the passages where they appear. The key terms are *citizens*, *general election*, *European parliament*, *electorate*, *universal suffrage*, and *general suffrage*. However, there are several other civics-specific terms such as *city council*, *regional council*, *turnout*, *commissioner*, and *resident*, which are neither in bold nor explained, but appear repeatedly in the text and are equally important for understanding the text. Some everyday words with specialized meanings are *majority*, *minority*, *low-income earners*, *disability*, *participation*, and *variety*. None of these words are explained in the text.