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Preparing For the Test: Teachers' Strategies for the English National Exams in Sweden

Förberedelser inför proven: lärares strategier för de
nationella proven i engelska i Sverige

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore strategies, challenges and benefits faced by English teachers in preparing students for the national English exams in Sweden. This qualitative study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with five secondary school teachers and analyzed their response using thematic analysis. The results reveal that teachers rely on scaffolding theory, individualized feedback, and practice with past exam materials to prepare students for the national examinations in: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Challenges include maintaining student engagement during repetitive practice and balancing test preparation with broader language education. The interviewed teachers highlight collaboration among colleagues as a factor in improving preparation, through shared resources and strategies. The study also discusses the benefits of preparation in reducing student anxiety and building confidence. However, the study reveals how repetitive test-focused activities risk lack of engagement from students. Given the increasing importance of national exams in Sweden, further research is recommended to explore strategies employed by teacher on a larger scale.

Keywords: English language teaching, language skills, national exams, preparation strategies, scaffolding, Swedish education, ZPD

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1. Introduction

Preparing students for the national English exams in Sweden presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for teachers. These exams that are a part of the Swedish education system are designed to assess proficiency in speaking, reading, listening and writing. They play a significant role in the students' futures while providing the schools and policymakers with data on educational outcomes (Skolverket, 2024a; Sundqvist et al., 2013). From an international perspective, the growing emphasis on standardized testing has sparked discussions about its impact on pedagogical practices and students learning, making it an issue for the teaching profession (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003).

The scientific problem lies in understanding how teachers balance the dual responsibilities of fostering comprehensive language development while at the same time ensuring that students are prepared for high-stakes exams. Research on standardized testing, including the Swedish national exams, highlights the theory of washback: where test preparation influences teaching and learning in both positive and negative ways (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003; Larson & Olin-Scheller, 2020). Teachers often navigate this balance by employing scaffolding strategies within the Zone of Proximal Development framework. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the Zone of Proximal Development identifies the gap between what learners can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guided assistance. Scaffolding, as described by Wood et al., (1976), provides temporary support tailored to students' current needs, enabling them to tackle progressively challenging tasks.

The dynamic interplay of support and independence is crucial to prepare students for national exams. Teachers can help students internalize skills by gradually withdrawing support as competence grows. However, challenges persist, including time constraints, resource limitations, and the risk of disengagement from repetitive, test-focused tasks (Au, 2007). Despite these concerns, little is known about specific strategies employed by teachers in the Swedish context, particularly in preparing students for English language exams (Hirsh, 2016).

The gap in research is significant, as preparation for national exams often intersects with broader professional areas of research. Teachers must address diverse students' needs,

adhere to curriculum goals, and uphold equality in assessment while working under limited time and resources (Tveit & Lundahl, 2022; Hirsh, 2016). From a professional perspective, understanding and sharing effective strategies for exam preparation is essential. This knowledge not only supports professional development and collaboration among teachers but also ensures that students receive fair and meaningful preparation for these assessments (Hirsh, 2016; Sundqvist et al., 2013).

The relevance of this study is further underscored by its part in key educational policies and theoretical frameworks. In the Swedish curriculum, Lgr22, (Skolverket, 2022) the emphasis on individualized support, opportunities and fairness, requires teachers to adapt their methods to meet varied students' needs. From a theoretical standpoint, the sociocultural perspective, particularly Vygotsky (1978) and Wood et al, (1976) offers valuable insight into how teachers can scaffold learning to help students succeed in high-stakes contexts (Shibani, et al., 2010). This perspective underscores the importance of tailored teachings and collaborative efforts in fostering student learning and achievement (Tzuriel, 2000).

Previous research on national exams provides insight into specific parts, such as the oral and written tests (Sundqvist et al., 2013; Larson & Olin-Scheller, 2020). However, comprehensive studies on how teachers prepare and strategize for all parts of the test remain scarce. International research on high-stakes testing further highlights the dual nature of test preparation, with its potential to either help or hinder learning depending on strategies employed (Harlen & Deakin Crick, 2003; Wayne Au, 2007).,

Thus, in addition to its academic contribution, this study holds practical significance for teachers. By identifying strategies, highlighting challenges and benefits, the findings can serve as a foundation for planning and strategizing the preparation of students for national exams. It focuses on how teachers in Swedish lower secondary schools prepare students for the English national exams. By analyzing their strategies and exploring the benefits and challenges, it seeks to bridge the research gap and contribute meaningfully to the teaching profession.

1.1 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the strategies and differences in approaches teachers choose to prepare their students for all three parts of the national English examinations. This study also examines whether teachers adapt their lesson planning and student preparations specifically for these and if they employ any strategies and lesson planning that are uniquely developed for these tests.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are some strategies that teachers use in preparing students for the English national exams?
2. What are some benefits and challenges involved in preparing students for the exam according to teachers?

2. Theoretical perspective

This empirical study is framed by a sociocultural approach to teaching and learning. In order to explore teachers' strategies in preparing students for the national exams, I specifically make use of two concepts linked to Vygotsky's (1978) theories: namely, *Zone of Proximal Development* (hereafter ZPD) and *Scaffolding* (Wood et al., 1976). The choice of these concepts is motivated by their inherent connection (Wood et al., 1976) and it provides a structured way to address the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with support.

2.1 The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky's (1976) ZPD identifies a learner's current level of development and explains how, with the guidance of teachers or collaboration with peers, they can achieve more than they would independently. This process highlights the critical role of social interaction in fostering learning, as it enables students to internalize new concepts and skills through shared efforts (Shibani, et al., 2010).

Chaikin (2003) elaborates on ZPD by presenting three foundational assumptions: *generality*, *assistance*, and *potential*. The generality-assumption suggests that while students can achieve some progress independently, they achieve significantly more through collaboration with peers or guidance from teachers. The assistance-assumption focuses on the role of a knowledgeable individual in facilitating learning by providing targeted support. Finally, the potential-assumption underscores the importance of recognizing individual differences, such as motivation and readiness to learn, which influence how the students engage with learning tasks.

2.1.1 *Dynamic Assessment*

The ZPD also forms the basis of *Dynamic Assessment* (hereafter DA), a method that integrates evaluation with guided intervention to assess both what a student knows and their capacity to learn (Lidz & Gindiz, 2012). Unlike traditional static assessments, which focus solely on measuring existing knowledge, DA incorporates scaffolding to help students navigate challenges (Tzuriel, 2000). While Vygotsky acknowledged the role of

standardized testing in measuring independent performance, he critiqued such assessments for failing to capture students' latent abilities and for overlooking the distinction between natural skills and advance expertise (Lidz & Gindiz, 2012).

2.2 Scaffolding

The concept of scaffolding, developed by Wood et al., (1976), expands on ZPD to describe the support teachers provide students during problem-solving. Pol et al., (2010) explains educational scaffolding as the process providing learners with temporary, tailored support to help them accomplish tasks they could not complete independently, gradually reducing assistance as their competence grows. Effective scaffolding involves adapting the level of support to the students' needs: offering more help when they struggle and withdrawing assistance as they gain competence. Beed et al., (1991) further emphasize that scaffolding is a strategic process aimed at gradually transferring responsibility by looking at pattern of responses and then depending on the level of response, make a decision on withdrawing support.

3. Background

This section provides the context for understanding the development and the role of national exams in Sweden, with a particular focus on the English national exams. The first part explores the historical evolution of national testing in Sweden. Highlighting its origins, milestones, and its influence on educational practices. The second part focuses on the English national exams, presenting their structure, purpose and significance within the Swedish education system.

3.1 The History of the National Exams in Sweden

According to Ericson & Gustafsson (2018), the Swedish school system has included national tests in some form since the mid-1900s. The earliest iterations of these test were oral assessments conducted in primary and lower secondary schools and this provided an initial approach to standardized evaluation (Tveit & Lundahl, 2022).

One of the first significant steps towards standardized testing was outlined in SOU 1941:11, which aimed to replace the entrance exams for the secondary school with standardized tests. These standardized tests were initially introduced in mathematics starting in grade 2, and as the system evolved, similar tests were developed for grade 4 and 6 (Ericson & Gustafsson, 2018; Ljung, 2002).

During the 1940s and 1950s, standardized tests became increasingly common alongside the implementation of a new grading system. This grading system worked alongside with standardized test results, along with other assessments, to calculate a summative score that set the students' final grades (Ericson & Gustafsson, 2018). To simplify the process, the tests for grades 4 and 6 were designed to be straightforward, reducing the time required for both grading and administration (Ljung, 2000).

In 1962, the Swedish educational system underwent a transformation with the introduction of Grundskolan, a compulsory school (Skolverket, 2024b), which included a relative grading scale from one to five. This reform also expanded the use of standardized tests to lower secondary students and covering subject such as Swedish literature, writing in Swedish, an alternative English course, and mathematics (Ericson &

Gustafsson 2018; Ljung, 2000). Although the new system faced significant criticism for educators and external personnel, leading to debates on how to refine the system. Standardized testing, however, became a helpful tool to assist teachers compared to earlier curriculums (Ericson & Gustafsson, 2018).

In 1990, the credibility of the national test was low, and a new goal-referenced system was introduced. This new approach was meant to help shift the focus from students comparing themselves to other students to evaluating their performance based on national standards (Tveit & Lundahl, 2022). This objective remained in place until 2011 when the purpose of the test shifted to a more regulatory role. By 2018, the national test results were mandated to carry more weight than teacher-graded assessments of the same material when determining final grades (Tveit & Lundahl, 2022). Lastly, in 2023 Skolverket introduced a new model for exam grades, in which students earn a fixed amount of points for each individual subtest, and the points will in turn be combined into an exam grade (Skolverket, 2024c).

3.2 The National Tests in English

In Sweden, national tests in English have been conducted since the 1960s, initially focusing on upper secondary grades (Sundqvist, et al., 2013). Responsibility for developing these exams is shared among different Swedish universities, with the English national test being developed by the University of Gothenburg (Ericson, 2024).

Until 1998, participation in the national English exam was not mandatory for students. However, with the introduction of the Lpo94 (Skolverket, 1994) curriculum, which emphasized a goal-oriented approach to education, the national test became a key tool to support this new system (Sundqvist, et al., 2013).

By 2018, the importance of national test results in determining final grades increased, giving these tests greater weight compared to teacher-created assessments. The results were expected to play a role in setting the students grade to ensure a fair evaluation process (Ericson, 2024).

Looking ahead, the Swedish educational system is moving toward digitalization. By 2026, the grading of national exams will be centralized and conducted digitally (Ericson, 2024). While this shift presents advantages, Ericson (2024) argues there are challenges in these digital platforms such as: format, layout and technical functionality. Hirsh (2016) adds another perspective, suggesting that although digitalization could lead to cost savings, it may complicate the process of collaborative grading, particularly essays.

3.3 The NAFS Project and the Different Parts of the Exam

The project responsible for developing the national exam is called Nationella prov i främmande språk (hereafter NAFS) is overseen by the University of Gothenburg (Göteborgs universitet, 2024a). These exams are designed through a collaborative process that involves teachers, teacher-educators, researchers, and students to ensure a comprehensive creation of the tests (Ericson, 2009). The tests are divided into three main parts: Part A, Part B (further divided into B1 and B2) and Part C (Göteborgs universitet, 2024c).

The exams aim to align with the Common European Reference Framework (hereafter CEFR). CEFR describes the level of communication skills students are expected to know (Skolverket, 2024a). Additionally, the results from these tests carry significant weight when determining students' final grades, highlighting their importance in the grading process (Skolverket, 2024c).

Part A focuses on *speaking*, requiring students to engage in tasks such as describing, discussing, or debating to solve specific problems through an oral conversation (Göteborgs universitet, 2024b; Ericson, 2009).

Part B evaluates receptive skills and is split into B1, which assesses *reading comprehension*, and B2, which focuses on *listening comprehension* (Göteborgs universitet, 2024b). The listening section includes monologues and dialogues, often accompanied by visual aids. In addition, it may feature English dialects from around the world to test adaptability (Göteborgs universitet, 2024a; Ericson, 2009). The tasks in Part B are designed as either selected response, where students choose from given alternatives,

or constructed response, which requires students to create their own answers (Ericson, 2009).

Part C centers on *writing*. Students are required to complete a structured assignment that assesses their ability to communicate effectively in written English (Göteborgs universitet, 2024b).

4. Literature Review

This section focuses on the washback effect and the broader implications of high-stakes testing on teaching practices. The concept of washback, as explored in Swedish contexts, examines how national English exams influence teaching methods and classroom activities. Studies highlight varying impacts across different sections of the exams, with oral and writing components introducing changes to regular teaching practices. Similarly, high-stakes testing, both in Sweden and internationally, is shown to shape lesson planning, often emphasizing test-specific preparation at the expense of broader educational goals.

4.1 Washback Effect

A study by Larson & Olin-Scheller (2020) examines the washback effect of the Swedish national examinations in reading comprehension, oral test, and writing. Their interview-based research involved 20 individual interviews and one group interview, with five teachers interviewed four times each, followed by a final group discussion. The findings reveal that teachers have varying perspectives on each section of the exam. When considering the national exam as a whole, the informants expressed ambivalence. Specifically, the oral and writing sections seemed to introduce activities that were not typically part of regular teaching, indicating some degree of washback effect. However, the reading comprehension part showed minimal evidence of such effects.

Similarly, Sundqvist et al., (2013) conducted a study that combined polling and interviews with three teachers, focusing on the oral section of the English exam in Sweden. They found that teachers considered working with old national exam materials, sometimes up to a year in advance, to be an effective way to prepare students. This aligns with Larson & Olin-Scheller's (2020) findings on the washback effect related to the oral examination.

Hirsh (2016) explores the concept of high-stakes testing, referring to the tests that heavily influence a student's grade, and by extension, their future opportunities. High-stakes testing also seemed to impact schools, as published results of these exams could harm a school's reputation if scores were low. Harlen & Deakin Crick (2003) expand on the effect

high-stakes testing has on education, observing in the United States that students often lack general course knowledge since teaching is narrowly focused on test preparation.

Hirsh (2016) identifies two primary ways in which teaching for high-stakes testing affects lesson planning. In the short term, teachers focus on addressing gaps in students' knowledge and tailoring individualized materials to prepare for future tests. Over the long term, however, the focus shifts towards developing broader skills, such as problem-solving and reasoning. Hirsh also points out that high-stakes testing, along with anxiety and stress, could hinder students' ability to perform well on exams.

Finally, Hirsh's (2016) study highlights two contrasting perspectives among teachers on interpreting national exam results. One group viewed these results as formative, using them to adapt and improve their teaching strategies for future exams. In contrast, approximately 30% of the teachers surveyed did not see the exam results as reflective on their teaching practices, attributing students' performance to external factors beyond their control.

4.2 High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing significantly impacts curriculum and teaching practices, as highlighted in multiple studies. Harleen & Deakin Crick (2003) conducted a comprehensive literature review analyzing research on students' motivation for learning in the context of summative testing and high stakes exams. Drawing on 19 different studies, they found these forms of testing tend to encourage surface-level learning rather than fostering a deeper understanding of the material. This effect was particularly detrimental to lower-achieving students, potentially widening the achievement gap between them and their high-achieving peers.

Pollard et al., (2000), as cited in Harlen & Deakin Crick (2003), discusses how linking teacher accountability directly to the test-results shifts lesson planning towards intensive test preparation. This focus often comes at the expense of activities aimed at fostering creativity and social skills. This is confirmed by, Gordon and Reese (1997) and Leonard & Davey (2001), as cited in the same review, who found that such heavy emphasis on test preparation could be so effective in coaching students that they might pass tests without

truly understanding the underlying material. This raises concerns about whether high-stakes testing accurately assesses students' knowledge and skills (Harlen & Deakin Crick (2003).

Expanding on this issue, Au (2007) conducts a qualitative meta-synthesis of 49 studies examining how high-stakes testing impacts curriculum and teaching practices. His findings show that teachers often narrow their focus to align closely with the test content, resulting in fragmentation of knowledge. This shift frequently leads to a more traditional teaching style, characterized by lecturing and a focus on test-specific facts, rather than a holistic approach to the subject matter. While there were some instances where high-stakes testing led to increased student-centered pedagogies and better integration of knowledge, these cases were rare. Overall, his research underscores that high-stakes testing significantly influences teaching practices and curriculum design.

5. Method

The following section outlines the methodological approach used in this study. First, I will introduce the schools and participants involved in the research. Secondly, I will describe the development and structure of the interview guide. This is followed by an explanation of the procedure for data collection and conducting semi-structured interviews. Finally, I will detail the process of data analysis using thematic analysis and a discussion about ethics, validity and reliability. This section concludes with a critical discussion about the chosen method.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how teachers adapt their teaching and the strategies they use to prepare students for the national exams. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five secondary teachers working in Kristianstad, and the data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A qualitative method is particularly suitable for this study as Larsen (2018) argues that it allows for follow-up questions and deeper exploration of participants' perspectives, which quantitative methods cannot achieve in the same way. Furthermore, qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning rather than generating numerical data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This focus on meaning over numbers align well with thematic analysis, which provides the flexibility to identify and group themes and patterns within the data, making it an effective tool for interpreting the data gained from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

5.1 Schools and Participants

5.1.1 Schools

The study was conducted in three schools located in Kristianstad, referred to as School A, School B, and School C, all part of Skolområde-östra. School A is a public school with an Arts and Graphic Design profile, serving approximately 425 subjects across middle and lower secondary grades with about 40 teaching staff. School B, also a public school, specializes in English profile classes, catering exclusively to lower secondary grades with about 260 students. School C, another public school, focuses on goal-oriented working methods, accommodating around 450 students. The schools primarily draw students from urban backgrounds, though some rural representations exist. The socioeconomic

conditions of the area range from good economic prerequisites (type 4) to some representation of less favorable conditions: type 1 and 2. (Boverket, 2022).

5.1.2 Participants

The study included five teachers with 5 – 27 years of experience, referred to by pseudonyms: Sara, Hanna, Karl, Adam and Lisa. As mentioned, all the participants work at schools in Kristianstad. Sara and Hanna work at school A, Karl and Adam work at school B and Lisa works at school C. Table 1 below provides an overview of the participants, including the schools and their teaching experience.

Table 1

Participant, School and Teaching Experience

Participant	Sara	Hanna	Karl	Adam	Lisa
School	A	A	B	B	C
Teaching experience	5 years	8 years	15 years	27 years	26 years

5.2 Interview Guide

Before I conducted the interviews, an interview guide was created (see the Appendix). The interview guide was based on Braun & Clark’s (2013) methodology, with additional ideas and clarification from Larsen (2018). According to Braun & Clarke (2013), the first questions in an interview should be “... less probing, sensitive and direct” (p.84). Therefore, the interview guide started with questions about the participants’ general teaching background. As suggested by Braun & Clarke (2013), the questions then moved from general to more specific topics, allowing the discussion to develop naturally. Questions about the four skills that English teachers work with were introduced early to provide a broad starting point. This also made it easier to follow up with more specific questions and ask for concrete examples. Following Larsen’s (2018) advice, the guide avoided close questions, making sure the participants could give detailed and thoughtful answers.

5.3 Procedure

For practicality and convenience, I contacted schools in and around Kristianstad, which is the area where I live and work. The headmaster at each respective school provided the contact information for the teachers and facilitated the communication with the respondents of the respective schools (i.e., school A, school B, school C). After receiving the contact information, I sent out an initial message with general information about the study and a request for suggestions for interview dates. After booking interview dates, the interview guide was sent by e-mail to prepare the respondents. All the interviews were conducted in a one-to-one setting except at School B where it was a group interview at the request of the respondents. All interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone.

At the start of each interview the respondents were informed of the purpose of the interview and study, how the information would be collected and used, they were free to not answer a question if they did not want to, they were able to quit the interview at any time they wanted, how long the information would be stored and who would have access to it.

5.4 Data collection and Semi-structured Interviews

5.4.1 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method for this study. Five secondary teachers in Kristianstad participated in interviews, which were conducted between November and December, with durations from 16 to 47 minutes. Table 2 below provides details on the interview dates and their respective lengths.

Table 2

Date and Length of the Interviews

Participants	Karl & Adam	Lisa	Hanna	Sara
Interview date	2024-11-20	2024-11-29	2024-12-03	2024-12-04
Interview length	24 minutes	47 minutes	16 minutes	19 minutes

5.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a versatile research method and according to Larsen (2018), qualitative interviews can vary in structure, with the primary distinction lying in the interview procedure. In structured interviews, questions are asked in a predetermined order, whereas in semi-structured interviews, the interviewer follows a list of questions but has the flexibility to adapt the order or explore emerging topics. This flexibility makes the semi-structured format particularly effective for gaining deeper insight into participants' perspectives (Larsen, 2018).

5.5 Analysis

I started out by transcribing the recorded interviews using Microsoft Word and as stated previously, the data was anonymized, and I labelled each respondent with a pseudonym. After transcribing the interviews, I used a thematic analysis approach to analyze the data. The thematic analysis approach consists of six steps: transcription, reading and familiarization, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and finally finalizing analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Through the process of transcribing each interview, the first step was started as I became more familiar with the details in the data. As a second step, coding was done by giving each of the different skills: speaking, reading, listening and writing a color. As this process continued, I started the close reading stage and began identifying examples of how teachers prepare students and strategies involved in planning lessons and exercises. Searching for themes became apparent quite quickly as the interview questions started with questions about the four skills in English. After doing the initial work of searching for themes, I started carefully re-reading and reviewing the materials. As the final step, I identified and organized the themes into four main categories: speaking, reading, listening and writing.

5.6 Ethics

According to Vetenskapsrådet (2024) and in accordance with The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity "ALLEA", research should be conducted according to four key principles.

Translated by the author into English:

1. Reliability – Ensure the quality of research in its design, methodology, analysis, and use of resources.
2. Honesty – Be open, fair and objective in the development, execution and reporting of research.
3. Respect – For colleagues, research participants, animals, society, ecosystem, cultural heritage.
4. Responsibility – For research from idea to publication, including leadership, organization, education, mentorship and its broader consequences. (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024, p. 11)

This study seeks to follow the ethical guidelines outlined by Vetenskapsrådet (2024), and I have made every effort to follow these recommendations to the best of my ability. These guidelines resemble those presented by Braun & Clarke (2013), emphasizing respect, competence, responsibility and integrity in research. Regarding the participants in this study, they were fully informed about the study's purpose and objectives, and verbal consent was given and recorded after providing this information.

5.7 Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research credibility is established in four ways: reliability, replicability, consistency, and accuracy of findings (Tracy, 2017). Validity in qualitative research differs slightly from its counterpart in quantitative studies. Larsen (2018) argues that, in qualitative research, validity is better understood in terms of credibility, confirmability, and transferability, while quantitative research focuses more on relevance and traditional validity measures.

Tracy (2017) also identifies eight criteria for high-quality qualitative research: a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence.

My study seeks to contribute to a highly relevant and current debate regarding teachers' strategies for preparing students for the national exams in English. This is a topic that is both timely and significant, especially as national tests play an increasingly important role in the Swedish education system.

The study strives to meet the criteria for high-quality qualitative research. It addresses a worthy topic by focusing on the strategies teachers use to prepare students for a high-stakes exam. To ensure rich rigor, I included the recommended number of respondents and followed a clear and transparent research process. Credibility is shown through detailed descriptions, clear context, and findings that can be transferred to other settings. Sincerity is demonstrated by being open and clear about my methods and procedures throughout the study. Finally, the aim is to make a significant contribution by shining a light on teachers' practices for preparing students, while ensuring the research is presented in an ethical and professional manner.

5.8 Method discussion

The semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow flexibility while exploring teachers' strategies for preparing students in speaking, reading, listening and writing. The interview guide included broad questions such as question 1 and question 6. These questions effectively encouraged discussion, though their general nature sometimes resulted in surface-level responses, creating opportunities for follow-up questions. The follow-up questions allowed deeper insight into the teachers' perspectives and into understanding their preparation strategies.

Thematic analysis was an effective method for analyzing the data collected in this study. Its flexibility allowed for a detailed examination of the teachers' responses, and this enabled the identification and organization of the patterns related to the teachers' strategies, challenges and benefits. However, the method's reliance on the researcher interpretation means that findings may be influenced by subjective bias. To address this a systematic approach was used, including the use of color-coding data to organize and ensure consistency in identifying patterns and themes.

6. Results

The research question of this thesis is to investigate how teachers prepare students for the national English exam, focusing on strategies they use and benefits and challenges in doing so. In order to address this question, the following section is organized around the four main themes identified in the data, namely: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Each theme is further organized in two sections: strategies used by teachers and benefits and challenges.

6.1 Speaking

6.1.1 *Strategies*

Teachers employ various strategies to prepare students for the oral part of the national English exam, with a strong focus on familiarizing students with the test structure and building their confidence in speaking English. One widely shared approach is using old versions of the exam as a starting point. Karl emphasizes the importance of starting preparation early in the school year “... at the start of the autumn term you put a bit more effort into preparing for the exam.” Similarly, Lisa highlights the dual benefits of this method:

First of all, it is important that they get to see an old national exam, they are used to getting to study for a test, but you cannot do that with the national tests. ... What can students come to expect questions wise, and they must be able to understand the questions, so it is important to go through the exam and it is vocabulary training as well ... it is not how many questions you answer, but how you answer them.

Hanna adds that repeated practice with the test format is crucial, allowing students to both understand and try the structure for themselves: “it is super important that they get to see how the exam is structured and that you go through it a lot of times, and also that they get to try doing a test ... and they practice English all the time”.

After this initial step, the teachers adapt their methods to further develop students' speaking skills. Karl creates materials that mimic the exam format to ensure familiarity with the exam and improve fluency:

... and you teach a bit more about appropriate phrases that you can use ... we have a lot of material we have produced ourselves that is similar [to the test] so that they know the structure: warm up and the different types of questions.

Hanna and Lisa incorporate thematic projects and discussions to engage students in speaking activities. Hanna describes her approach: "... working with projects is a way to prepare for the test ... for example, working with film ... Important that they are able to express what they think and are able to participate in a dialogue". Lisa shares a similar method, using films and classroom themes to create discussion prompts: "I sometimes write my own discussion questions based on what has happened during lessons or maybe watching a film and during the movie [I write] discussion questions based around a theme".

In contrast, Sara focuses on equipping students with strategies for managing conversations during the test. These include techniques such as rephrasing unfamiliar words or handling unexpected situations. She explains:

We work with the books we have so to speak, but we also had quite a few projects ... and you prepare students the whole time ... debates and discussing strategies around how to speak in different situations, what do you do if you don't know a word and how do find a way to rephrase a word.

6.1.2 Challenges and Benefits

The teachers identify several benefits and challenges in preparing students for the speaking test. Sara stresses the importance of teaching formal language as part of preparation, noting its role in ensuring students understand the context of the exam:

It is important that they recognize that the national test is a formal situation ... and that they do not use slang words ... we work a lot with how to develop formal use of language ... they can't just dissa [disrespect] someone ... it is a good

opportunity for them ... the preparation is also a part of whole course, weaving it together with the rest of it.

Hanna views the preparation process positively, describing it as a “win-win situation” where students simultaneously improve their language skills and build readiness for the test. Similarly, Lisa emphasizes the motivational benefits of preparation, explaining: “... by training and succeeding you can sort of build up their confidence”.

However, the repetitive nature of test preparation can pose a challenge. Karl highlights this, saying: “... they might tire of training for the test”. To address this, he and Adam work on creating a varied environment for practice. Karl explains the importance of group dynamics: “... we work a lot with setups for the groups or rather pairs so that they feel comfortable ... they get to train in different pairs ... [the pairs] works well after the test”.

6.2 Reading

6.2.1 Strategies

Adam and Karl emphasize the importance of familiarizing students with the structure of the test and the types of exercises they are likely to encounter. Adam explains how old national exam exercises are used to help students build this familiarity:

We pick put old national exam exercises so that they can build up familiarity with the exercises and see the structure of the test, for example you are only able to put one x in the boxes [on a multiple choice-exercise] ... and then you are able to show them, when you have graded it, if you put a cross in all boxes you would have failed that exercise on a NP [the national exam in English].

Similarly, Karl highlights the importance of understanding how questions are constructed and recognizing key terms within them. He states: “This year the focus was a lot on how the questions were formed and keywords in the questions”.

Both Adam and Karl pointed out that teacher feedback plays a crucial role in guiding students through these exercises and ensures that they learn how to approach the test effectively.

Hanna further elaborates on the significance of teaching students' strategies for handling different types of texts they might encounter during the test. She explained:

They should have familiarized themselves with the structure of the different types of exercises before the test ... and they study reading all the time, but it is also about strategies. How do you approach a text? How should you think? How do you read it? ... and that there are different text-types.

Lisa also focuses on strategies, specifically using feedback from previous test results to aid student preparation. She describes her approach:

Strategies, for example, I let them see how different students answer the questions and discuss the reasoning [behind the answers] ... I give individual feedback to each student based on how they did on earlier tests ... [I] use this feedback as a reminder for all the NP [the national exam in English] training.

According to Lisa, this reflective use of feedback helps students pinpoint areas for improvement and reinforces understanding of key concepts. It also allows for a targeted approach to addressing individual challenges.

6.2.2 Challenges and Benefits

Lisa, Adam, and Karl identify several benefits of preparing students for the reading part of the test, while also highlighting some practical aspects of the process. Lisa emphasizes the advantage of assigning old test results as homework and notes its dual benefits of reinforcing learning and saving preparation time: "I use their test as homework, so in that way I save time, you simply give them exercises that they struggle with as homework which also benefits them as they get a reminder on what the struggle with".

Adam points out the collaborative nature of preparation among teachers, which benefits students by exposing them to a wider variety of materials. He explains: "... you sort of give your colleagues material for the students to work with as you sit close to each other ... this is good for the students since they get a variety of materials to work with".

Karl, on the other hand, focuses on the stress-reducing benefits of preparation, emphasizing how these exercises help students feel more confident and calm ahead of the test. He notes: "... I don't see a challenge in preparation for the test, rather there are only benefits in doing so especially since they are nervous for the test, and this usually calms them".

6.3 Listening

6.3.1 Strategies

Karl, Hanna, and Sara discuss different strategies for preparing students for the listening part of the national English exam, focusing on practical exercises, test familiarity, and ongoing practice. Karl highlights the value of using exercises that mirror the test format, often found in coursebooks, and teaching students' strategies to avoid common mistakes. He explains:

A lot of coursebooks have adopted the form [of exercises in the English national exam] ... so you are able to choose similar exercise and use them as well ... we speak a bit about the mistakes they can do while listening, for example not listening the whole way through and writing a lot so that they stop listening and miss information, tips like.

Hanna points out that listening exercises serve a dual purpose. In addition to improving students' listening skills, they also prepare students for the speaking part of the national test. She notes:

You work with listening during normal lessons, doing exercises and listening to texts, it is also, in a way, part of the preparation for speaking, since you listen to each other ... you also train on the example exercises from Gu [Gothenburg University] ... get familiar with the structure of the test ... and a part is to dramatize the test.

Sara emphasizes that listening practice happens naturally during regular lessons, such as when students respond to questions or instructions. She explains: “Preparing for listening happens continuously [during lessons] ... even in classroom when they raise their hand, I see that they have understood ... and you can use this to gauge the level for the material you use”. She uses this classroom interaction as a tool for feedback.

6.3.2 Challenges and Benefits

Karl, Lisa and Hanna discuss the benefits of preparing students for the national test, with a focus on time efficiency and language practice. Karl highlights the advantage of using existing materials, noting: “There is a lot of material already and that is a time saver”. Similarly, Lisa points out that the availability of pre-prepared materials makes the process easier for teachers, saying: “It is difficult to create your own material ... you save time with all the material there is prepared”.

Hanna takes a slightly different perspective, namely, focusing on the benefits for students’ language learning. She explains: “It is difficult to see any disadvantages in preparing students for the test, like they do train English so that is good”. For her, test preparation provides an opportunity for students to engage with and practice English.

6.4 Writing

6.4.1 Strategies

Lisa, Sara, Hanna and Adam speak about different strategies for preparing students for the writing part of the national English test, focusing on a variety individualized plans, feedback, repetition and reflection.

Lisa underlines the importance of creating individual plans and peer-response for students based on their previous work:

I give an individual plan for each student, based on earlier text that they wrote ... I think preparing for speaking and writing is similar ... it is important that they know how important it is to develop sentences, you cannot start a text with I, I, I, I, after each other and that is training we start early with ... and we work with peer-response a lot, reading each other text ... I give them text that have different

grades, and they discuss why they think that it got that grade ... that's how they will develop as writers.

Sara focuses on formative feedback during the writing process, addressing common grammatical mistakes and encouraging students to think about their writing. She explains:

It is all about feedback ... I try to give the students formative feedback during writing a text ... and we go through common mistakes students does at a NP, capitalization of letters, is are was were [grammar], main clause and subordinate clause, conjunctions, grammar like that, what happens if you rewrite a sentence? How does it look then?

Hanna discusses the importance of repetition throughout the year, where students write essays regularly, including a practice version of the national test essay. She uses these essays to provide formative feedback and to help them review their work:

They are usually prepared in advance, they have written a lot of essays ... but you have to repeat before the test so that they really, really do remember what they are supposed to think about ... and we go through the example exercises and write then they get feedback on what they write ... they have already done a similar NP [the national exam in English] essay earlier in the year and we speak about that one as well

Adam focuses on previously graded tests as a way for students to reflect and understand expectations. He describes this strategy as successful:

Looking at old test that have already been graded and let them [students] guess the grade is usually a successful exercise, but preparing for the test is overall woven into the term as a whole you don't specify a lesson or a week of lesson just for this.

By integrating preparation into regular teaching throughout the term, Adam ensures that students view test preparation as a part of their ongoing learning.

6.4.2 Challenges and benefits

Hanna and Karl point to the benefits of preparing students for the national test, particularly in terms of efficiency and engagement. Hanna discusses that preparing students in a similar way is effective because: “Since everyone is going to do the same test, you can prepare in a similar way and that is effective”. Karl sees test preparation as an opportunity to change the normal routine of teaching lessons. He explains: “Preparing for this is good since you can sort of put it into different parts of the term when students get bored of the usual material”.

For writing, Lisa uses individual plans and peer-response exercises to help students improve grammar, discuss and think about their text. In comparison Sara focuses on formative feedback to help students address common mistakes. For speaking, Hanna and Karl use projects and pair exercises to help students build confidence and focus on formal language. Regarding listening, it is a skill that is incorporated into the regular lessons.

Conclusively, the data show how teachers prepare students for the national test by focusing on the four skills: speaking, reading, listening, writing. The teachers approach varies for each skill, although they all mention using old versions of the national exam in different parts of the process of preparation.

7. Discussion

This section begins by addressing the first research question: what strategies do teachers use in preparing students for the English national exams. This part of the text investigates the various approaches teachers use when teaching the four skills: speaking, reading, listening and writing. The second part reports on the findings in this study in relation to the second research question: what are some benefits and challenges involved in preparing for the exam according to teachers?

7.1 Research Question 1

The first research question concerns the strategies teachers use to prepare students for the national English exams. Analysis of the data reveals a varied range of approaches tailored to the specific demands of the test's components: speaking, reading, listening, and writing.

7.1.1 Writing

A common thread across all strategies is the emphasis on scaffolding and gradual development of student independence. The teachers leverage Vygotsky's ZPD by providing targeted support during early preparation stages gradually reducing assistance as students gain confidence and competence (Vygotsky, 1978). This approach is particularly evident in writing instructions, where formative feedback and peer-response activities enable students to refine their skills through iterative processes. Such methods align with Wood et al., (1976) scaffolding theory, which emphasizes the temporary nature of instructional support, and the support is gradually withdrawn as learners achieve greater autonomy.

Additionally, the findings highlight how preparation is often embedded into regular teaching, particularly in listening and speaking activities. Teachers incorporate exercises that mimic the test formats while simultaneously encouraging students to use English in authentic and engaging contexts. This dual-purpose approach ensures that test preparation does not come at the expense of broader language development. It also reflects principles of dynamic assessment (Lidz & Gindis, 2003), where teaching and evaluation are

integrated, enabling teachers to adapt strategies based on real-time assessment of student performance. The use of group discussions, thematic projects, and situational role-playing further demonstrates how preparation for speaking relates to overall communicative development.

7.1.2 Speaking and Listening

For speaking and listening, preparation strategies reflect the dynamic assessment framework, which integrates teaching and evaluation (Tzuriel, 2000). Teachers incorporate practice into regular classroom activities, making it a natural and continuous part of learning. These methods align with findings by Sundqvist et al., (2013), which highlight the efficacy of integrating test preparation with everyday teaching to reduce stress and enhance long-term language proficiency.

7.1.3 Reading

When addressing reading, the use of past exam materials to familiarize students with question types and test formats is prominent. This strategy helps students navigate complex texts by building their ability to adapt reading techniques to different challenges (Larson & Olin-Scheller, 2020). It emphasizes the importance of equipping students with practical skills for handling reading tasks. Additionally, this approach highlights the washback effect of high-stakes testing. As Harlen & Deakin Crick (2003) explain, test characteristics often influence and impact teaching methods.

The findings also suggest that preparation for reading emphasizes critical thinking and adaptability. Teachers encourage students to identify keywords, interpret different types of text, and apply targeted reading strategies. These skills not only prepare them for the exam but also support their overall classroom learning. By emphasizing these transferable skills, teachers bridge the gap between test preparation and broader educational goals. This approach ensures that students develop practical language skills alongside exam readiness. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on collaborative and social learning, where students develop skills gained through interaction with more knowledgeable peers or teachers.

7.2 Research Question 2

The second research question examines the benefits and challenges teachers perceive in preparing students for the English national exams. Analysis of the data highlights a range of positive outcomes, such as increasing student confidence and skill development, alongside challenges like limited time and maintaining student engagement during repetitive preparation activities.

7.2.1 Benefits

One key benefit is the structured framework provided by the exam, which helps focus instructional efforts and reduce student anxiety. Familiarizing students with the test formats and expectations builds their confidence and equips them with the tools to perform effectively. This aligns with Au's (2006) findings, which suggest that targeted preparation fosters student-centered pedagogy and supports individualized learning.

Furthermore, preparation for national exams often serves as a structured opportunity to revisit and strengthen essential skills. Teachers noted that regular writing assignments and repeated feedback sessions not only prepare students for the writing sections but also enhance their overall ability to express themselves effectively in English. Similarly, listening activities incorporated into daily lessons allow for continuous assessment and treated improvement. These practices ensure that the exam preparation process contributes to long-term learning outcomes beyond the immediate high-stakes context. This resonates with the principles of scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976), where support is structured to meet specific learning goals while enabling independence over time.

Another advantage is the collaboration potential among educators. By sharing materials and strategies, teachers enhance the quality and variety of preparation activities, reflecting a collective approach to addressing high-stakes testing challenges. This collaboration underscores the importance of teacher networks in improving educational outcomes and aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of social learning environments, where professional dialogue fosters efficiency in teaching.

7.2.2 Challenges

However, significant challenges remain. One notable challenge is the risk of disengagement caused by repetitive test-focused activities. This issue mirrors concerns by Au (2007), who noted that high-stakes testing often narrows curricular focus and potentially diminishes students' motivation. Additionally, balancing the demands of test preparation with broader curriculum goals presents a persistent dilemma. Teachers must navigate the tensions between equipping students for exam success and fostering language skills that extend beyond the test.

The findings also reveal logistical challenges. Particularly in terms of time constraints and resource availability. Teachers reported relying on pre-existing materials or creating their own exercises to meet the demands of preparation, which can be resource intensive. Despite these challenges, they emphasized the value of integrating exam preparation seamlessly into the broader curriculum to mitigate potential disruptive effects. By doing so, they aim to preserve the balance between exam readiness and deeper language learning. This balancing act aligns with Harlen & Deakin Crick's (2003) emphasis on the dual impact of high-stakes testing, which can either enhance or hinder broader educational goals based on implementation strategies.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored how English teachers in Swedish lower secondary schools prepare students for the national exams, focusing on speaking, reading, listening and writing. By examining the strategies teachers use, their reflection on the process, and areas for further studies, this research sheds light on teaching practices and the role of preparation in supporting students and teachers.

Teachers employ a variety of strategies to prepare their students, such as reviewing old test materials, designing lessons that mirror the exam format and providing targeted feedback. These strategies are not only effective in helping students familiarize themselves with the test, but they also support their development in language learning. The combination of peer-collaboration and self-assessment allows for refining and practicing skills. Preparation is not just seen as a way to practice for the examinations but also to build students' language learning and motivation.

At the same time, teachers reflect on challenges and benefits of the test preparation process. While repetitive practice can sometimes impact student motivation, a structured approach to preparation helps reduce stress and build confidence. Teachers also emphasized the need to strike a balance between focused test preparation and broader language education to ensure students develop well-rounded skills. Additionally, collaboration among colleagues plays a role in enhancing the preparation process. By sharing diverse teaching materials, exchanging strategies, and pooling their knowledge, teachers can create an effective approach to preparing students for the international English exams.

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The small number of respondents limits the generalizability of the results. As the data reflects the experiences and strategies of only five teachers. Additionally, the study relies solely on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. While this method provides in-depth insights, incorporating different types of data could yield a broader perspective. For example, surveys or classroom observations could complement the interview data to give a fuller picture of preparation strategies.

Further research could address these limitations and explore additional areas. One potential focus is the effect of digitalized testing and centralized grading, which may influence how teachers approach preparation in the future. Another potential focus is the role of test preparation in schools with different resources and student demographics, as these factors may affect the strategies used. Exploring how students experience and perceive preparation could also offer valuable insight on how to make it more effective and engaging for them.

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Appendix

Interview guide

Hur länge har ni arbetat som lärare?

Vad fick dig att välja läraryrket?

1. Vilka strategier och lektionsupplägg använder du för att förbereda eleverna inför det nationella provet i speaking, reading, listening, writing.
2. Väljs material specifikt ut för träning inför proven? Exempelvis gamla nationella prov.
3. Planerar ni tillsammans i arbetslaget om förberedelser inför provet?
4. Vilka fördelar respektive nackdelar kan du se med att träna inför proven?
5. Hur anpassas lektionsplaneringen överlag inför provtillfällena? När börjar de träna? Skiljer sig planeringen inför de olika proven?
6. Påverkar engelska nationella provet den övergripande planering av den ordinarie undervisningen?
7. Finns det några speciella anpassningar som görs under förberedelsestiden och har de gett resultat? Vilka utmaningar finns det när detta planeras?
8. Nivå anpassas träningen inför proven? I så fall hur genomförs den träningen? Grupper / uppdelning?