**DEPARTMENT OF
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EXPERT OR NON-EXPERT READERS?

A study on company reports and personnel attitudes from a language consultancy viewpoint

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Essay/Thesis:	BA thesis, 15 hec
Programme:	Language Consultancy Programme, 180 hec
Course:	EN1321, In-depth Course, Linguistic Research Project, 15 hec
Level:	First Cycle
Semester/year:	St/2015
Supervisor:	Joseph Trotta
Examiner:	Miguel Garcia-Yeste
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Abstract

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This study's aim is to examine a marine survey company's report writing to find possible proficiency needs among the reporting department personnel and consequently for the readability of the reports. Also, to examine what impact language consultancy work and plain English editing of report texts have on the personnel. The method used was a needs analysis as a quantitative/qualitative three-step-method: report text analysis, editing of report text into plain English, and questionnaire and interviews analyses. The material consisted of ten company reports, questionnaire responses from 80 of the personnel (including a control group), and interview answers from four of the personnel. Because the report's target group must be considered in each case as to include either experts, non-experts, or both, the text analysis shows that there are areas in which the personnel's English could be improved in order to improve the reports' readability, for example regarding punctuation and the use of cohesive devices. The questionnaire shows that the personnel's attitudes towards plain English differ depending on the grammatical, structural, or language-related aspect in focus, and the interviews identify general rather than specific needs. The results indicate that a language consultant could meet the needs, for example by holding writing courses.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

There exists a wide range of research, done both recently and earlier, on using needs analysis as the method for studying students in language teaching, and companies respectively (e.g. Chambers 1980; West 1994; Wu & Chin 2010). Despite this, there has been little work done on company reports in relation to language proficiency. This study was conducted with the aim to perform such a needs analysis, on the company MMT and its reporting department. MMT is a Swedish marine survey company and a main part of the company's operation is to perform surveys and write reports of the findings for their clients who have contracted them. In the specific context of the MMT reporting department and their reports that are subjects to this study, my definition of proficiency is being able to write professionally, meaning the scientific prose the reporting department personnel currently use in the reports, as well as being able to adjust the writing after potential non-expert readers of the reports' target group. This target group must be considered individually for each report, in order for the reporting department to know for certain on what level to put their writing in each specific case.

In this section, theory and research on needs analysis is briefly presented, as well as the company MMT. Also presented are the aim, research questions, and outline of this study.

1.1.1 Language needs in teaching and business

In the first ever issue of The ESP Journal, Chambers discusses needs analysis as a concept, and claims a re-evaluation of the concept is in order (1980). He bases this claim on an outline of the ambiguity and vagueness of both the concept and the two words individually, and presents an alternative way to use the concept which is to restrict its meaning to what he calls a target situation analysis or TSA (1980:29). Chamber's discussion is related to English language teaching and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) especially. However, the notion of target situation analysis also applies to the present study of company reports and personnel attitudes, because the method is designed to collect and analyse data to locate current possible needs for proficiency improvement, and suggest how these needs can be met to create an improved target situation. The target situation of this study is the MMT report in final format, the one sent to the client, written in a language that in each individual case includes the readers of the target group.

Wu & Chin (2010) focus on professionals from the banking and financial sectors in their study on language needs. Among their findings is the fact that the globalisation makes professionals need further, more specific skills in English communication in order to perform their work (2010:73). They also found that using a needs analysis is a vital support for examining professionals' needs, to actually pin down what to teach and test in relation to what English skills are needed for the work in the sectors concerned. They bring to light, like Chambers, the concept of TSA; however they also present learning situation analysis, LSA, and present situation analysis, PSA, as important concepts for an investigation using a needs analysis (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998, in Wu & Chin 2010). Their method consisted of three phases similar to those used in the present study – see section 3 – and in the present study, MMT's reporting department is the present situation under examination in order to suggest improvements for the target situation described above.

Another study using needs analysis is West (1994), in which the focus is on language teaching. West points out something which seems common for research within this area: a needs analysis is carried out through several steps, of which questionnaires and interviews are often integral parts (1994:7). The methodology of the present study is designed with these known principles in mind and consists of three steps: an analysis of report texts, a questionnaire, and four interviews (see further in section 3).

1.1.2 The company

As described above, the subject of this study and needs analysis is the Swedish marine survey company Marin Mätteknik (MMT Sweden) AB. MMT works with marine surveying for different customers, for different purposes. These purposes may be to prepare for placement of an electricity cable or a pipeline for gas or oil transportation, or to film the seafloor before and after removal of an old mine to ensure that the impact on the seafloor and animal life has been as small as possible. On MMT's website (*We are MMT* [online]) one can read that they specialise within the following areas: renewable energy and marine cable, oil and gas, and hydrography. In their own words, they are 'a professional and expert solution to your marine surveying needs'.

MMT's corporate language is English, because a British office has been a part of the corporate group since a few years back. Most of MMT's personnel are Swedish; however there is a significant number of personnel who are non-Swedish. Therefore English is not only the language for communication externally, but also internally between colleagues.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine, through a needs analysis, the marine survey company MMT's report writing within its reporting department in order to find what possible improvements may be made regarding the language proficiency of the personnel – proficiency as in their ability to adjust the language of their writing after expert or non-expert readers of the reports' target group – and consequently for the readability of the reports. Further, the aim is to examine what impact language consultancy work and plain English editing of report texts have on the personnel.

The following research questions are examined in this study to achieve the aim:

- What proficiency needs does a readability analysis of the reports expose?
- How do the personnel perceive plain English versions of authentic report texts and what attitudes towards plain English do they have?
- What perceptions of language proficiency and needs do the personnel have?

1.3 Outline of study

This study is introduced in section 1 above. In section 2, a theoretical framework is presented on language consultancy and plain English, as well as on the notions of language policy and corporate language. Section 2 also presents important concepts that are used in the study. Section 3 presents the material of the study and the method steps used in the needs analysis, along with text analysis categories, and limitations and ethical considerations related to the material and method. The results of the study are presented in section 4, followed by section 5 in which the results are discussed and concluded in relation to the study's aim and research questions. A complete list of references is presented in section 6 and the questions used in the questionnaire and interviews are presented in the appendices in section 7.

2 Theoretical framework

This study is very practically oriented; however, a set of theory and previous research on applied linguistics is reviewed in this section in relation to the particular approach taken in this study. Also presented here are specific terms used in the study.

2.1 Previous research

Little research has been carried out on company reports specifically for the topic of language proficiency in a company where English is the corporate language, however there is much research on other aspects of workplace communication and language use. Companies in which English is the corporate language have been the subjects of several studies, with focus on aspects such as code-switching (Falk 2013) and general language proficiency among the personnel (Apelman 2010), and the consequences that follow the creation of a multilingual company as a result of that company choosing English as the corporate language (Mobärg 2012). Thus, this section presents previous research on the concepts of language policy and corporate language.

2.1.1 Language policy and corporate language

Deciding upon a corporate language within a company is the result of that company's language policy, and in Sweden more and more companies have chosen to have English as their corporate language (Josephson & Jämtelid 2004). In his study on the Swedish-British company Astra Zeneca (2012), Mobärg examines the effects of making English the corporate language of a company merger. In particular, the aspects of the study are the language proficiency of the personnel and their accompanying attitudes towards the merger. Mobärg found a significant tendency of the attitudes towards the new linguistic situation to correlate with the personnel's proficiency in English (2012:149). Those who were positive towards the merger tended to have a good English proficiency, and vice versa. In contrast to Mobärg's findings, the present study focuses on personnel's language proficiency and attitudes from a language consultancy viewpoint. Taking this approach instead will also reveal how a company's language proficiency needs can be met, complementing Mobärg's mapping of proficiency levels which he conducted using a questionnaire testing personnel's vocabulary and grammar (2012:151).

According to Spolsky, to establish an official language as a means of language management does not guarantee that the policy following the decision is pursued by, for example, the company personnel (2012:5). Accordingly, written material within a company where English is the corporate language, like MMT, might be based on a variety of language choices and usage mixes resulting from the personnel's varying proficiencies in English, as may the MMT reports which the present study aims to explore. Haglund explains the importance of having a linguistic strategy in such a company, that is to say a well-defined language policy, in order for the personnel to be successful in the new linguistic scenarios that will occur (2002:12). In the present study, that scenario is when personnel from MMT's reporting department write reports: what language proficiency needs a report analysis reveals and how the personnel perceive plain English versions of report texts.

Another study raises the question of what consequences English as a corporate language has for company personnel and their written communication (Apelman 2010). In her study, Apelman explores the language proficiency of engineers from eleven companies, what the engineers are required to know in order to be able to write in English during their workday, using a methodology similar to the present study consisting of a questionnaire survey, interviews, and document analysis (2010:13). One of the many results from her study shows that the switch from Swedish to English as corporate language in a company affects all employees on all levels, for speech and writing both (2010:138). Although the majority of her survey respondents regarded their English proficiency as good enough for their work, almost half of them responded, contradictively, that they need further English training for their work.

2.2 Theory on language consultancy and plain English

In 1978, a two-year programme in language consultancy, unique for Sweden, was started at Stockholm University with the democratic aim to better include all Swedes in the public discussion, by improving and simplifying the Swedish that was used at that time by politicians and authorities (*Unik språkutbildning firar 30 år* [Unique language education celebrates 30 years] [online]). Today, language consultancy work includes many different aspects: for instance, language consultants can review written material, perform language policy work, educate company professionals or public officials in written and spoken Swedish (and English for the third specialisation available at the University of Gothenburg), and run projects in language cultivation (*Språkkonsultprogrammet, 180 hp* [Language Consultancy

Programme, 180 hec] [online]). Language consultants focus on the target group when writing or editing text and aim to produce plain language that can be understood by as many as possible within the target group. The terms 'target group' and 'plain language' used here are also defined in section 2.3.

Plain English, which is the British term for 'plain language' (Cutts 2013:xii; Petelin 2010:205), can be defined as follows: 'A written communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand it, and use it' (PLAIN, in Cutts 2013:xii). The concept is well-known, which can be evidenced also by a brief search on it on the Internet. For example, the Plain English Campaign have composed a guide on how to write in plain English, which is available on their website for public use (*Plain English tools* [online]). The guide includes a description of plain English and a list of points to consider when one wants to write in plain English, for example 'keep your sentences short' and 'avoid nominalisations' (*How to write in plain English* [online]).

In her paper, Petelin defines plain language as follows: '[t]he key principle of plain language is that the intended reader can use the document for its intended purpose' (2010:206). The present study aims to investigate the language proficiency of the MMT reporting department personnel to make suggestions for how they can improve their ability to adjust their writing after their intended readers, who might differ in different cases. When describing the benefits of writing in plain language, Petelin means that it saves both time and money to use plain language in texts, and that the clarity which plain lanugage generates 'achieves democracy, equity, authenticity and transparency' (2010:212).

An aspect of another scholar that Petelin highlights is that 'plain' in 'plain language' and 'plain English' is perhaps an unfortunate word because of the association it carries (Garner 2002, in Petelin 2010:207). Such an association may be that 'plain' means 'simple', a conception which is also opposed in the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's handbook on plain English, in which the definition of plain English writing is that 'plain English assures the orderly and clear presentation of complex information so that [intended readers] have the best possible chance of understanding it' (1998:5). The present study uses the concept in this sense, that writing report texts in plain English is a strategy the MMT reporting department can use to present their scientific prose (their type of complex information) in a clear way whenever their target group consists of non-expert readers.

Consequently, Plain English suggestions in this study for how MMT report texts could be rewritten may not always be the choices that improve the texts' readability. The reporting department must consider 'the ones that make sense' (1998:6) for each specific report.

Steinberg (1991) presents the concept of plain language as 'language that reflects the interests and needs of the reader and consumer rather than the legal, bureaucratic, or technological interests of the writer or of the organization that the writer represents' (1991:7). Cutts however points out that what is plain differs between different audiences as well as different parts of the English-speaking world (2013:xiii). This means that each case must be considered individually, and that is the starting point from which the present study examines MMT's reporting department and their reports.

2.3 Language consultancy key concepts

2.3.1 Plain language – a Swedish perspective

Like plain English, plain language in Swedish refers to language that is clear as opposed to for example bureaucratic language. The Language Council of Sweden (Språkrådet in Swedish) is an institutional department in Sweden, and they work with promoting plain language to be used by Swedish authorities (*Some information in English about plain Swedish language* [online]). Two main points the council use in their definition of plain language are, in a text, to 'match your writing to the needs of the readers' and to 'consider the purpose and message carefully'. A key concept in Sweden for discussing plain language is 'cultivated, simple, and comprehensible language' which is a translation of the Swedish Language Act's 11th Act of law for language use in the Swedish public sector (*Ministry of Culture* [online]).

In her study, Sundin (1999) compares the English speaking world and Sweden regarding plain language movements, style guides, and texts written in plain language. To examine the plain language texts, her method was to analyse the average sentence length, the use of the active voice, and, in passive voice sentences, whether old information comes first and complex or new information comes last, since these are three factors that supposedly produce 'clearer' and 'more accessible' sentences (1999:6). The present study also examines average sentence length as part of the MMT report text analysis (see section 3.2.1). In her conclusion, Sundin puts emphasis on one of her findings from the analysis of the plain language texts, arguing that plain language style guides do not mention that one good reason to actually use the passive voice rather than the active, which goes against plain language

recommendations, is that it links sentences together and puts new information at the end of the sentences, which follows plain language recommendations (1999:17). This finding complies with what was mentioned in section 2.2: whether plain language suggestions actually produce clearer or more readable sentences has to be considered individually for a certain text in a certain case.

2.3.2 Target group adjustment

Another concept, perhaps the most important concept within the relatively new field of language consultancy, is target group adjustment (my translation of the Swedish word 'mottagaranpassning'). This concept very well fits the first point made by The Language Council of Sweden, mentioned in the section above: a text that is adjusted after its target group is written based on the needs of the readers. Language consultants learn that, in order to write a text or edit an already existing text in clearer, simpler language, one must focus on the target group – the intended readers of the text.

3 Material and method

In this section the material and method of this study are presented, as well as limitations related to the methodological choices and the material chosen.

3.1 Material

3.1.1 Reports

A significant part of MMT's operation is to write survey reports after each project as part of the final products for the clients. The material used in this study is ten of these survey reports, throughout this study referred to as Report 1–10 with their respective year of final form in brackets. MMT have decided to write all their reports in British English, and the report writing is carried out by the reporting department where reports are written and rewritten in several revisions before the final drafts are sent to the clients. Because the analysis of the reports possibly indicates areas for improvement regarding language, grammar, and other aspects of language proficiency and report readability, the material is relevant for all parts of the present study's method and the overall aim. The report analysis has also functioned as a basis for composing both the questionnaire and interview questions.

To narrow down the present project to a feasible undertaking from the start, I chose to collect six of the reports from MMT's British clients, and four reports from other European countries. A first thought was to keep to reports from British clients only, however since the aim is to perform a needs analysis in order to find where MMT's reporting department currently stand proficiency-wise, I decided to add four more reports from 2014 to the material. Another decision taken was to analyse only final reports and no revisions, as initially intended. The final reports give a clear enough view of MMT's present situation regarding proficiency and report readability, which is also a part of the study's aim.

The size of the reports ranges from 50 to 96 pages of which the average word count is 13 440 words, and each report includes a text body, tables, and pictures. Although format changes can be spotted over time, the reports are all similarly structured, including, for instance, a title page, a table of contents, an abbreviations section, an executive summary, an introduction to the survey, and survey results.

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3.1.2 Interviews and questionnaire

The interviews were held early in the project process in separate, scheduled sessions in a booked conference room at MMT. Hence the situation of the interviews was the same for all four interviewees. The interviewees were three of the personnel (interviewees A–C) with much reporting responsibilities and one of the personnel (interviewee D) who controls the quality of all reports between revisions and before final delivery. Each interview was recorded upon every interviewee's agreement, using a mobile telephone's recording function. For the full text of the interview questions, see appendix 1. The interviews were held in Swedish because this is the interviewees' first language; however the appendix includes English translations in brackets.

The questionnaire was sent out further into the project process, by email including a short description of the survey and a web link that was kept open for seven weeks. It was sent to MMT's own email group 'reporting' which includes the reporting department consisting of 56 recipients, since the aim was partly to examine what attitudes the reporting personnel have towards plain English versions of report texts. It was also sent out to a control group consisting of 24 recipients from six other, smaller MMT departments. Because the questionnaire was sent out to two respondent groups, two web links were used: one for the reporting department and one for the control group. This way it was possible to separate the answers from the two respondent groups and still keep all respondents anonymous.

The questionnaire was composed using an online programme (*SurveyMonkey* [https://sv.surveymonkey.com/]) and it consisted of ten questions, see appendix 2. As already stated, the respondents were anonymous. All questions were unlocked which means the respondents were able to pass over questions and were therefore not forced to answer all questions to complete the questionnaire. However, the individual response rates that were lower than 100% were not too low as to consider any questionnaire uncompleted. Of all completed questionnaires, only seven questions were passed over; two respondents passed over two questions each, and three other respondents passed over one question each. The questionnaire was in English because the respondents have different first languages, and because MMT's corporate language is English.

3.2 Method

The method of this study combines qualitative and quantitative elements and includes text analysis of MMT reports, plain English text editing of report sentences or excerpts (throughout the study referred to as plain English text versions), and analyses of interviews and the questionnaire. These various method steps together form the needs analysis which was performed in order to fulfil the aim and answer the research questions. See section 1.1.1 for a review of needs analysis theory and methodology which has served as inspiration for this study's methodological choices.

3.2.1 Text analysis

To meet the aim and discuss what possible needs MMT has regarding report writing, the text analysis performed in this study focused on analysing the readability of the MMT report texts, using the term as in Hellspong (2001). All reports were collected and analysed in Word format. An initial part of the text analysis was a target group analysis, since the readability and possible needs would then be measured based on how the target group, the intended report readers, were thought to perceive and understand the report texts. The text analysis focused on the three aspects grammar and cohesion, composition and metatext, and language and the lexicon, by asking the following specific questions:

- Is the reading interrupted by unclear punctuation (or lack of punctuation)?
- Does the text include heavy noun phrases?
- What is the average sentence length?
- How are cohesive devices used?
- How is the text composed: is metatext included?
- Does the text include technical terms?
- What language proficiency does the text demand from the reader?

All questions were collected from and inspired by Hellspong (2001). The questions were answered by analysing the MMT reports' 'Executive summary' and 'Introduction', since these were two sections where large text bodies were found (also see section 3.4 Limitations below). The questions on metatext and punctuation were answered by finding sentences in these two report sections that included metatext or unclear punctuation after the definitions of those categories which are presented in section 3.3 below. Heavy noun phrases were defined

as phrases that, except the noun, include modifiers, complementing sub-clauses, or adverbials (see section 4.2.1). To determine what language proficiency the text demands from the reader, the previous six analysis questions were taken into consideration. The search for cohesive devices and technical terms allowed use of the search function in the word processing programme; therefore, the whole report was analysed for these parts of the analysis. The average sentence length was calculated by selecting three paragraphs of similar size from each report, counting the sentences' lengths, and then calculating the average sentence length. A word in this calculation was counted as any letter, number, or symbol formation which was separated by a space on both sides.

3.2.2 Plain English text editing

This step came naturally, as a part two of the method, since findings from the text analysis constituted the examples of authentic report texts that I edited in plain English (*How to write in plain English* [online]). The plain English editing of report texts was also inspired by the language consultancy key concepts 'target group adjustment' and 'plain language' (explained above in section 2). The authentic examples and their plain English counterparts functioned as a basis for one part of the next method step, which was questionnaire analysis. The edits that were made in the plain English versions are described in italicised brackets in appendix 2. As mentioned earlier in this study, plain English recommendations and their necessity must be viewed in the specific context of each MMT report. The context of my plain English versions in the questionnaire is the MMT report written for a potential non-expert target group, in which plain English might increase the readability.

3.2.3 Interviews and questionnaire analyses

After performing and recording the interviews and after collecting the answers from the questionnaire, an analysis of this material was carried out. This analysis was made in order to answer research questions two and three specifically (see section 1.2). According to West, it is beneficial to combine the two methods interviews and questionnaire survey in order to draw out the best of each (1994:8). In the present study, the interviews provided an overall understanding of the reporting department's work and their opinions on writing reports in clear, plain language, and what language proficiency improvements the interviewees think they need, as well as the reporting department as a whole. The interviews are therefore not included as transcriptions in this study, nor are all interview questions given detailed

representations, because the interviews are to be looked on as providing insight into the MMT personnel's reporting work in relation to language proficiency. Primarily, and most importantly in accordance with the aim of the study, the questionnaire quantitatively measured how the reporting department as well as the control group perceive and accept plain English text versions, and who they think the MMT reports' target group consist of.

3.3 Text analysis categories

This section presents important categories that were used to answer the questions in the text analysis (also see section 3.2.1).

3.3.1 Punctuation

Punctuation is important in written texts because it guides the reader to when sentences begin and end, and makes the text more understandable (Cutts 2013:96). Correctly used punctuation gives a clear text structure and improves readability. The text analysis of this study is focused on the use of the comma, an aspect in which British English differs from other varieties.

In lists separated by commas, it is optional in British English to use the final, so called 'serial comma' or 'Oxford comma' (*Comma (,)* [online]; Cutts 2013:99; *New Oxford Style Manual* 2012:71). For reference, this study follows the Oxford guideline and therefore uses the serial comma in all lists. An argument for using the serial comma is that leaving it out may risk the clarity of the sentence. That could be the case in lists where phrases or coordinated rather than single items stand together. However, some suggest that in lists with only single items the serial comma can be left out in British English (Gilderson 2000:126).

A less accurate comma usage is to put a comma between a subject and its verb (*New Oxford Style Manual* 2012:69). It may come naturally to put a comma in that position because readers often pause their reading here briefly. However, splitting the subject and verb may risk the intelligibility of the sentence and make it more difficult to read and process.

3.3.2 Cohesion

Cohesion is another important aspect for readability since using cohesive devices in a text makes it link together better, showing the reader how the different parts of the text are related (*Cohesion* [online]; Downing & Locke 2006:277–280; Rahman 2004:31). This study examines cohesion in the MMT reports through quantitatively measuring one of such cohesive devices, namely connectives. Connectives, also referred to as conjunctives (Rahman

2004:45), can be divided into different categories regarding what meaning they provide in a text. For instance, they can add contrasting ('however'), causal ('hence'), or exemplifying ('for instance') meaning to the relationships between different parts of a text (*Cohesion* [online]; Rahman 2004:45). Exploring the use of connectives in the text analysis of this study indicates how and to what extent the relationships between the different parts of the MMT report texts are made explicit in order to aid the readers from the identified target group.

3.3.3 Metatext

While Rahman suggests connectives should be classified as '[i]ndicating relations', he proposes that metatext should be classified as '[t]extual [r]eference to' three different categories in discourse: entities such as 'This study' or 'In section 1.2', acts such as 'As mentioned previously', and labels such as 'This question' (2004:39). Accordingly, metatext is text within a text that is not an actual part of the content of the text, but rather explains the text in one way or the other. Plain English is about writing and organising the sentences of a text in a clear and concise way (*How to write in plain English* [online]; Williams 1991:59) in order for the target group to understand the text fully and effectively, and using metatext throughout a text is an effective way in which to do this.

3.4 Limitations

As stated above in section 3.2.1, the text analysis of the MMT reports was narrowed down to three different aspects specifically, in order to avoid too large an expansion of this part of the analysis. A range of more detailed questions could then be composed. Furthermore, only certain sections in the reports were chosen for the text analysis, which were sections that included large text bodies unlike other sections of the reports that included more tables or pictures. These other sections which included more scientific data rather than a text body made this narrowing down necessary in order to keep to the study's aim.

The online questionnaire programme had one free version: a beta version which allowed the user to compose a questionnaire with ten questions with the possibility to receive 100 answers. For this reason, the questionnaire was limited to ten questions. Considering the size and scope of this study, I regarded a questionnaire with ten questions sufficient enough to get an idea of the reporting department's attitudes towards plain English text versions. After observation from two respondents, the answers for questionnaire question 2 had to be considered possibly dubious. The respondents told me that the three alternatives in question 2,

three sentences that they were told to rate from 1–3, could not be rated the way they desired. Hence, when the results from this question are presented and discussed in this study, this factor must be kept in mind (see table 3 in section 4.4).

Because authentic examples of report texts were included in the questionnaire, the respondents' opinions may have been biased and the responses therefore false. For this reason, a control group was also given the questionnaire. Another aspect of the questionnaire that is important to consider is how to treat each response when presented in this study. Answers to questions that invited the respondents to produce sentences or comments of their own have been restated in the study in their fully original forms. Answers to question 6 however, which asked the respondents to rewrite a sentence and insert a comma at a relevant spot, have been restated in the study in the question's original form (except the comma). This decision, to leave out respondent misspellings in the answers to this question, is based on the argument that those parts of the rewritings were not subject to the study of that specific questionnaire question, a subject which was to study the use of the comma.

3.4.1 Ethical considerations

Since this study is closely connected to MMT – the material was collected from the company after approval – every part included that may in its original form reveal identifying information has been made anonymous. This also applies to the plain English versions of report texts and excerpts, both when used as examples in this study and as parts of the questionnaire. The parts that have been anonymised have been substituted with letters as for example X, Y, and Z, or the numbers 1–9, or with general words such as FILENAME.

4 Results

4.1 Target group analysis

Both the questionnaire and the interviews were partly constructed with the common aim to find out who the target group of the MMT reports are. Based on these results (further presented below) the target group are identified as primarily MMT's clients, who are most likely familiar with the marine research area, but also people who may not have any previous knowledge within the area, such as public officials or authorities. These two potential groups of readers within the target group are throughout the present study referred to as expert and non-expert readers respectively, and for which of these readers the reports are written may differ from report to report. Interviewee A explained how MMT reports are sometimes written for Swedish authorities, such as an environmental report to be read by politicians, which means these reports would then be written primarily for non-experts. When the reports are written for marine engineers or technicians, however, they are written for expert readers.

On the one hand, all four interviewees agreed that the target group of the reports are either people belonging to the marine industry, like MMT, or belonging to some kind of authority, and therefore it is difficult to define the target group in any exact way. The reports may be read by other geologists and biologists for example, or they may be read by persons with little or no knowledge of the marine research area. On the other hand, most of the interviewees said that they think of the target group as British English speaking.

The results from the questionnaire show that many of MMT's personnel determine the target group of the MMT reports to be clients that are assumed to have prior knowledge that is relevant in relation to the content of each report – see table 5 in section 4.4 below. That is, the target group know marine specific terminology, know how to interpret data presented in the reports, and are consequently engineers or other technicians. Only two out of 33 of the reporting department personnel explicitly responded that the client does not necessarily have prior knowledge of the marine area.

In contrast to the results above, both the text analysis of the reports and interviewee D (the report quality controller) reveal that the MMT reports' target group must be thought of as potentially having no prior knowledge of marine concepts and technology. As a starting point when working with checking the quality of the reports, interviewee D thinks of the receiver as not being familiar with the industry. This way interviewee D separates the language part and

the content part of the reports, in agreement that the reader should be thought of as British English speaking. With this mind-set, it becomes possible to find text parts that might need further explanation, parts that are self-evident for experts within the area but not for others.

4.2 Report readability

4.2.1 Grammar and cohesion

The results in this section were found based on the four first text analysis questions presented in section 3.2.1: Is the reading interrupted by unclear punctuation (or lack of punctuation)? Does the text include heavy noun phrases? What is the average sentence length? How are cohesive devices used?

Cohesion is a grammatical aspect which is important for readability. See section 3.3.2 for a brief explanation of cohesion and cohesive devices. Report 2 (2011) includes explicit cohesive devices, for example using the causal connectives 'thus', 'accordingly', and 'therefore' (*Cohesion* [online]). These three and five more connectives are listed in the table below: four causal (including 'hence'), two exemplifying ('such as' and 'for example'), and two contrasting ('however' and 'alternatively'). The table presents the number of times they occur in each report (the reports are here referred to as R1–10):

Table 1. Eight connectives and their total number of occurrence in the ten MMT reports

	R 1	R 2	R 3	R 4	R 5	R 6	R 7	R 8	R 9	R 10	Total
thus	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	6
accordingly	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
therefore	2	1	3	6	5	1	1	2	0	4	25
hence	0	1	4	1	0	0	2	0	0	6	14
such as	13	11	6	4	4	3	3	3	1	4	52
for example	4	0	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	3	12
however	7	6	9	5	5	4	10	1	1	9	57
alternatively	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	27	20	28	16	14	8	20	6	2	29	

As presented in section 3.1.1, the reports' average word count is 13 440 words. The last two reports, Report 10 (2014), the report with the second most words (17 560), and Report 9 (2015), the report with the fewest words (6 037), demonstrate that connectives are currently sparsely and inconsistently used within MMT's reporting department, since these are the

reports with the most and the fewest connectives respectively and since their word count can be considered high, even for the report with the fewest words. The reporting department must consider the importance of using connectives for each report individually and whether they are to be read by experts or non-experts primarily. Also, the fact that connectives are inconsistently used may stem from each report writer's individual writing style.

Sentence structure and length

Two other grammatical aspects that affect a text's readability are sentence structure and length. A sentence which begins with a noun phrase with modifiers and complementing sub-clauses may be difficult to read, because the reader must keep all these items in the working memory until the finite verb of the sentence appears. The initial noun phrase makes the start of the sentence heavy or 'left-heavy' which is the Swedish term for this grammatical phenomenon. Other components that can make a sentence left-heavy are adverbials and other kinds of sub-clauses put in initial position. Report 3 (2013) includes an example of a left-heavy sentence, which was also the example used in question 7 in the questionnaire, see section 4.4. Another clear example of this is the following sentence from Report 4 (2012): 'From KP X (LAT 12° 34.567'N, LON 12° 34.567'W) to X (LAT 12° 34.567'N, LON 12° 34.567'W) along the Western route, the route is per 2008 survey'. To aid possible non-expert readers, this sentence could be edited by putting the last clause, 'the route is per 2008 survey', in initial position. This clause is the actual main clause of the sentence, while the initial KP values are part of the adverbial explaining *where* the route conforms to the 2008 survey. The edited sentence would read 'The route is per 2008 survey, from KP X (LAT 12° 34.567'N, LON 12° 34.567'W) to X (LAT 12° 34.567'N, LON 12° 34.567'W) along the Western route'.

In any position, a long noun phrase may be harder to process than a shorter one. Early in Report 7 (2014) there is a heavy noun phrase functioning as object of a sentence: 'MMT performed *a detailed high-resolution offshore remotely operated vehicle (ROV) survey of the X cable*' (my italics). This sentence may work for scientist, expert readers, however to facilitate the reading for non-experts within the target group of the MMT reports, the sentence could be rewritten by making the head of the heavy phrase occur earlier. Given that the head of the phrase is 'survey', a plain English version would read: 'MMT performed a detailed offshore survey of the X cable, in high-resolution, using a remotely operated vehicle (ROV)'.

To increase a text's readability and help its reader keep focus, the common suggestion for an average sentence length is 15–20 words (Cutts 2013:1; *How to write in plain English*

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[online]; Sundin 1999:11). However, it is preferable to vary the length of the sentences in a text, and the analysis shows that the sentence length is varied in all MMT reports analysed. The results from the calculation presented in section 3 show that the average sentence length in the reports is 25 words per sentence. This means that the reports have an average sentence length of only 5 to 10 words above the suggested average. However, some sentences in the reports are found to be up to 55 words long and others only 8 words long (these examples came up during the calculation), and whether or not those sentence can be considered clear and readable based on their length must therefore be considered individually, since the sentences in MMT's reports may consist of items that are actually not words although they fit in to the category of words used in the calculation of the sentence length of the present study. The sentence which consists of 55 words, mentioned above, comes from Report 10 (2014):

> The summary of the absolute value of the DOC in % of the Z cables show that only 3 % of the Z Y-East cable and 2 % of the Y-West cable is covered by less than 0.5 m and that 55 % and 58 % respectively is covered with more than 1 m of sediment.

The sentence consists of five percent signs and six numbers, i.e. not words, which however can be considered known items by readers regardless of their background knowledge of the marine research area. Nevertheless, if the reporting department were to consider this sentence difficult to read based on these non-words and a non-expert target group, a plain English suggestion would be to divide sentences with this length and content in the MMT reports.

Punctuation

If effectively used, punctuation may improve readability because it can provide structure and clarity in a sentence. See section 3.3.1 for a description of the comma usages that are treated in the current section.

The analysis shows that the use of commas in lists differs in the reports when it comes to the final, so called serial comma. There are lists in the MMT reports that are written without the serial comma; for example in Report 6 (2014): 'These areas, 200 x 200 m, are to be surveyed with Transverse Gradiometer (TVG), MBES and SSS'. However, Report 7 (2014) includes a list where the serial comma is used: 'The survey spread comprised a dual-head multibeam echo sounder (MBES), a side scan sonar (SSS), Video, and a Orion cable tracker' [sic]. These results illustrate that there is no single rule in British English for the serial comma, along with the fact that the MMT reports are written by several authors who have individual writing styles.

There are also examples of comma use in the MMT reports that may hinder the readability in those cases where non-expert readers must be considered for a report. In Report 6 (2014), there is a sentence in which one extra comma has been included before the beginning of a list: 'Results as, bathymetry, SSS mosaic, magnetic grid and detected objects as magnetic anomalies and SSS contacts are also presented' (my underline). On the same page of this report there are sentences in which commas have been inserted between subjects and their verbs; one example is 'The UXO desk top study, presents a contamination class' (my underline). In report 8 (2014) a comma is used where the coordinating conjunction 'and' should be: 'This report presents the detailed results from the bathymetrical, geophysical survey and the ROV inspection performed by Y' (my underline).

4.2.2 Composition and metatext

Asking the following question during the text analysis provided the results in this section (also see section 3.2.1): How is the text composed: is metatext included? Of the three metatext categories presented in section 3.3.3, discourse entities and acts are particularly common in the MMT reports. Report 8 (2014), for example, includes the following sentence beginning a paragraph: 'This report presents and summarises the operations undertaken during the Y survey'. 'This report presents and summarises', being a textual reference to both a discourse entity and an act, informs the reader on exactly what the report is about and what the report will do. 'This report presents' is used in all except two reports, Report 7 (2014) and Report 10 (2014), with a total occurrence of 12 evenly distributed (1–2 times per report).

Report 1 (2011) differs from the rest of the reports because it also includes a glossary at the beginning, directly after the abbreviations section. The glossary is a tool to help the target group understand concepts and words that are possibly difficult to understand, and therefore it improves the overall readability of this report. A glossary is a clear example of metatext, because the purpose of a glossary is to explain other text, in this case concepts, technical terms, and words that are used throughout the MMT report.

4.2.3 Language and the lexicon

This section presents the results from the report analysis based on the following two questions presented in section 3.2.1: What language proficiency does the text demand from the reader? Does the text include technical terms?

Technical terms

In providing specific meaning for a specific concept within a specific field, technical terms can hinder readability for readers of a non-expert target group. As determined in section 4.1, the target group of MMT' reports may consist of experts or non-experts, which the reporting department must find out for certain for each individual report, and the readability of the reports can therefore also be measured by examining the use of technical terms.

All ten MMT reports include marine specific technical terms. Examples of used technical terms, their numbers of occurrences counted based on the whole of the reports counted together, are 'bathymetry' (238), 'geophysical survey' (54), 'raw data' (16), 'seabed feature' (99), 'sediment' (431), 'digital delivery' (20), 'MBES data' (35), and 'remotely operated vehicle' (8) (also known as 'ROV', which in this abbreviated form has 191 occurrences). Terms of this kind might be difficult to understand for readers in the target group who are not familiar with geology, marine technology, or data, which results in decreased report readability based on the identified target group of the MMT reports in cases when this group consist of non-expert readers.

Expected language proficiency

To answer what language proficiency the MMT report texts demand from the reader, the previous results from the text analysis need to be taken into consideration. First, the calculated average sentence length (5 to 10 words above suggested average length) of the MMT reports indicates that readers should be somewhat familiar with scientific prose to be able to process and understand all sentences in the reports, which are of various lengths.

Second, given that there is evidence of the reports including technical terms, left-heavy sentences, and heavy noun phrases, the results up to this point in the text analysis signal that MMT report texts demand a relatively high level of language proficiency from the reader. That could be to say, the target group's language proficiency should at minimum match that of the reporting department, and 10 of the reporting department personnel have a university degree in English while 23 of them have an upper secondary school certificate in English (see questionnaire question 9, in section 4.4). This must be viewed in combination with the personnel being highly familiar with the scientific prose of their research area.

However, the large amount of metatext in the reports suggests that the target group, in case it consists of non-experts either partly or primarily, should not need any particularly high language proficiency when it comes to technical terms or abbreviations specific for the marine

research area. Report 1 (2011) is especially reader-friendly in this sense, because it includes a glossary. However, yet again, questionnaire question 1, see table 2 in section 4.4, displays a conflicting result in one of the respondents' comments which says that the reports' section for abbreviations and definitions is used in most cases only for abbreviations. The analysis shows that of the ten reports examined in this study, only Report 8 (2014) includes definitions in this section. These are however not definitions of technical terms; they are units, for instance m for 'metre', and synonyms for company names such as MMT for 'MMT Sweden AB'.

4.3 Interview results

4.3.1 Language proficiency needs

Two of the interview questions asked the interviewees to identify personal needs for language proficiency improvement, as well as such needs for the reporting department as a whole. The overall response from the interviewees was that they believe their proficiency in English is good enough for them to be able to perform their work. However, interviewee A expressed a need for English proficiency improvements in general. Interviewee A explained that people have a certain, established way of expressing themselves which might not always be the correct way, hence the needs for general improvements. Interviewee A thought the reporting department as a whole also needs general proficiency improvements, and mentioned that although MMT has native English speaking consultants who sometimes participate in the report writing, that does not mean that these consultants are more proficient writers of English in comparison to Swedish writers of English. In cases when consultants are involved in the projects, interviewee A might show them how the reporting department usually write a certain text and ask them to write after that style. Further, interviewee C mentioned that personnel who are new to MMT and to the reporting department may need time in order to learn how to express themselves in the company's established ways.

For interviewee C, a strategy for continuous English proficiency improvement is to try to embrace and learn from the comments on the reports that come from native English speaking clients and colleagues that are native English. However, as Interviewee A pointed out, being a native is not the same as being highly proficient in English. Regarding the whole reporting department, interviewee C said that most of the personnel are proficient enough and want to write as accurately as possible, but there are those who think it is difficult to write in English, perhaps because their proficiency does not meet the requirements for report writing

of this kind. Interviewee B identified two possible proficiency needs for the reporting department as a whole: to write more objectively or to use 'we', rather than subjectively in using 'I', and to avoid conventions of spoken language to reach into the report texts.

The following question asked the interviewees in what ways they think someone like a language consultant could meet these identified needs. Examples that came up was to act as an advisor on how to write and to hold writing courses on how to write concisely and on a level adjusted to the texts' target group. Other examples were to go through all parts of report texts that are often reused in many reports and make sure such text is good on all levels (shows unity, correct grammar and so on), compose writing guidelines for new personnel, and to spread knowledge and explain why texts are or should be written in a certain way.

4.4 Questionnaire results

The total number of questionnaire responses was 42 out of 80, or 52.5%. Of this total number, the response rate was 58.93% from the reporting department (33 out of 56) and 37.5% from the control group (9 out of 24). As mentioned in section 3.1.2, each of the ten questions could be passed over, meaning that the total response rate disregards each respondent's individual response rate.

The responses from the questionnaire are presented in ten tables below. For the questions that provided comment boxes, the respondents' comments are briefly presented below the tables concerned. The responses are given in percentage values of the total number of answers and with the number of respondents in brackets, separate for the reporting department (RD in section 4.4) and control group (CG in section 4.4). In section 4.4.1, the results regarding the personnel's attitudes towards plain English are presented further.

Table 2. Results from questionnaire question 1

How do you think technical terms and marine specific concepts are best explained in a report?			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
in the text body	21.88% (7)	22.22% (2)	21.95% (9)
in a separate glossary	68.75% (22)	66.67% (6)	68.29% (28)
in either of the above	3.13% (1)	11.11% (1)	4.88% (2)
no explanation is necessary	6.25% (2)	0% (0)	4.88% (2)

One (1) RD respondent passed over question 1; therefore each percentage concerned is based on a total of 32 answers from this respondent group.

Six RD respondents commented on question 1. One pointed out that MMT does have a report section for abbreviations and definitions and that the latter part could be used more for explaining concepts and terms. Another respondent stated that it depends on what kind of term it is, and if explaining it in the text body would interrupt the text flow. Two CG respondents commented, of which one claimed that how terms and concepts are best explained in a report depends on whether or not they have been presented previously. The respondent also claimed that it depends on the readers' previous knowledge and experience.

Table 3. Results from questionnaire question 2

Rank these sentences after how you perceive the message is delivered: very clearly (1), quite clearly (2), vaguely (3). (You can also use drag-and-drop.)			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department and Control group		
	1 very clearly	2 quite clearly	3 vaguely
The location of the two pipelines was provided by the client as a .shp file (FILENAME).	58.54% (24)	34.15% (14)	7.32% (3)
The client provided the location of the two pipelines as a .shp file (FILENAME).	34.15% (14)	56.10% (23)	9.76% (4)
As a .shp file (FILENAME), the location of the two pipelines was provided by the client.	7.32% (3)	9.76% (4)	82.93% (34)

One (1) RD respondent passed over question 2; therefore each percentage concerned is based on a total of 32 answers from this respondent group. Also, the results presented here are not divided into the two respondent groups, because the answers to question 2 must be regarded possibly dubious (see further in section 3.4 Limitations).

This question did not provide a comment box, however one respondent emailed me with two alternative sentences that this respondent would have chosen rather than the ones in the questionnaire. These sentences were based on the first two example sentences, but had the noun 'location' in the plural 'locations' and the 'was' in the first sentence replaced by 'were'. The original, example sentence one (1), came from Report 9 (2015) and reads 'The location of the two pipelines were provided by the client as a .shp file (FILENAME)'. That is, the original sentence was incorrectly composed, with 'were' in the plural although it refers to 'the location' in singular. The respondent's alternative suggestions, along with the questionnaire examples, indicate that the sentence can be written in two ways: either 'the locations… were provided' or 'the location… was provided'. The original sentence may have been written using a mix of these two versions, accidentally making the sentence ungrammatical and possibly difficult to understand from a plain English viewpoint.

Table 4. Results from questionnaire question 3

Which synonym would you choose for the meaning 'to do something'?			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
perform	63.64% (21)	44.44% (4)	59.52% (25)
conduct	15.15% (5)	22.22% (2)	16.67% (7)
carry out	12.12% (4)	22.22% (2)	14.29% (6)
Other (please specify)	9.09% (3)	11.11% (1)	9.52% (4)

As the table shows, most of the respondents preferred the word *perform* for the meaning 'to do something'. Two of the four respondents who chose the alternative 'Other (please specify)', both RD respondents, claimed that all three synonyms should be used in the same text to provide the reader with variety and to avoid repetition. To vary the use of synonyms in the reports may be a strategy to consider when writing for potential non-expert readers.

Table 5. Results from questionnaire question 4

According to you, who is the primary receiver and reader of MMT's reports?			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
The client (familiar with marine research)	12	5	17
The client (not necessarily with relevant scientific background knowledge)	2	0	2
The client PM (Project Manager)	0	1	1
The client and MMT (the whole company)	1	1	2
The client and authorities/agencies/the public	3	0	3
MMT (internally, i.e. others in the personnel)	1	0	1
Engineers/technicians with relevant scientific background knowledge	9	1	10
Anyone with relevant scientific background knowledge	2	0	2
Do not know	1	0	1

Two RD respondents and one (1) CG respondent passed over question 4; therefore answers from 39 out of 42 of the total number of respondents are presented here. Because they were asked to answer in their own words, no percentage values are given in this table. After analysing the responses to the question, I grouped the responses into the set of response alternatives as presented above. This table displays what was treated earlier in the results section (see section 4.1): most of MMT's RD personnel write reports with a target group in mind that are equal experts within the marine research area; however, the target group may consist of readers who are non-experts.

Table 6. Results from questionnaire question 5

Which one of these sentences do you consider the most readable (i.e. the easiest to read and understand)?			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
At four proposed Met Mast locations within the X Zone, further detailed data acquisition was undertaken for the installation of meteorological monitoring masts, each of which was 1 km² in size.	34.38% (11)	50% (4)	37.50% (15)
Further detailed data acquisition was undertaken within the X Zone at four proposed Met Mast locations for the installation of meteorological monitoring masts each of which was 1 km² in size.	28.13% (9)	0% (0)	22.50% (9)
Further detailed data acquisition was undertaken within the X Zone at four proposed Met Mast locations for the installation of meteorological monitoring masts, each of which was 1 km² in size.	37.50% (12)	50% (4)	40% (16)

One (1) RD respondent and one (1) CG respondent passed over question 5; therefore each percentage concerned is based on a total of 40 out of 42 answers from the respondent groups.

Seven RD respondents commented on question 5. One proposed that the phrase 'each of which was 1 km² in size' should be placed after 'Met Mast locations', to avoid confusion. Moving that phrase would make the sentence more readable since it would be clearer that the phrase refers to the location and not to the masts. The comments to this question are especially interesting to study since in fact none of the response alternatives were edited into plain English compared to the original sentence (the second example sentence in the table above). Plain English editing would have been to connect the phrase 'each of which was 1 km² in size' to 'Met Mast locations' – which is exactly what some respondents have observed. Another respondent suggested all three examples are too long and should be divided into shorter parts. This is an example of how such a division could look like: 'Further detailed data acquisition was undertaken for the installation of meteorological monitoring masts. This was done at four proposed Met Mast locations within the X Zone, each of which was 1 km² in size'. Some of the respondents commented that they could not see the difference between examples two and three, where the difference was a comma insertion before the last phrase.

One (1) CG respondent commented on question 5, with the personal opinion that all sentence examples were quite difficult to read, perhaps as a result of the respondent never having read an MMT report before. This comment implies that this respondent is not part of the discourse community of the RD personnel, which may also be the case for non-expert readers whenever they are part of the reports' target group.

Table 7. Results from questionnaire question 6

Read the following sentence: 'The photo resolution makes it possible to identify biota to lowest taxonomic level practicable at all stations where visibility was acceptable'. In the box below, rewrite the sentence by inserting a comma to separate its two clauses (i.e. its two parts):

Respondents' response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
The photo resolution makes it possible to identify biota to lowest taxonomic level practicable at all stations, where visibility was acceptable	24.24% (8)	22.22% (2)	23.81% (10)
The photo resolution makes it possible to identify biota to lowest taxonomic level practicable, at all stations where visibility was acceptable	21.21% (7)	11.11% (1)	19.05% (8)
The photo resolution makes it possible to identify biota to lowest taxonomic level, practicable at all stations where visibility was acceptable	48.48% (16)	66.67% (6)	52.38% (22)
The photo resolution makes it possible to identify biota to lowest taxonomic level, at all stations where visibility was acceptable	3.03% (1)	0% (0)	2.38% (1)
No comma inserted	3.03% (1)	0% (0)	2.38% (1)

The results in table 7 show that the RD respondents determine clauses differently. To understand what the sentence actually means, its context must first be considered. The context is that the sentence comes from Report 2 (2011), from a paragraph about photo images. Also, the sentence could be rewritten without changing its meaning: 'Because of the photo resolution it is possible to identify biota at lowest taxonomic level at all stations where visibility was acceptable'. This suggests that the sentence could stand without the word 'practicable', and should therefore be separated by a comma between 'level' and 'practicable'. That is the location where most of both the RD and CG respondents perceive the sentence should be divided by a comma, if a comma is to be inserted.

Table 8. Results from questionnaire question 7

Choose the sentence you think is most clear and readable, and comment on why:

Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
In the nearshore parts of the route, both in the north and south, bedrock outcrops and coarse sediment interpreted as diamicton are present.	30.30% (10)	66.67% (6)	38.10% (16)
Bedrock outcrops and coarse sediment interpreted as diamicton are present in the nearshore parts of the route, both in the north and south.	69.70% (23)	33.33% (3)	61.90% (26)

I asked the respondents to comment on their answers, resulting in 28 comments for question 7. Some RD respondents claimed that the second example follows a better sentence structure, explaining first what was found and then where it was found. Others stated that having the location first, as in the first example, better sets the frame for what follows in the sentence.

The CG respondents who commented on the question partly agreed with the second example having a better structure, and partly that giving the location first sets the frame more clearly. In addition, one (1) CG respondent stated that the first example is easier to understand because it does not have many difficult words in the beginning. My interpretation is that the difficult words are the technical terms 'bedrock outcrops' and 'coarse sediment'.

Table 9. Results from questionnaire question 8

Choose the alternative you prefer:			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
Side scan sonar data has been used for interpretation of surface geology and identification of seabed features and objects.	36.36% (12)	33.33% (3)	35.71% (15)
Side scan sonar data has been used to interpret surface geology and identify seabed features and objects.	39.39% (13)	55.56% (5)	42.86% (18)
I think the above sentences are equal and prefer either of them.	24.24% (8)	11.11% (1)	21.43% (9)

There were four comments on question 8 from the respondent groups counted together. It is interesting that they do not explicitly mention that the examples are different because the nominalisations 'interpretation' and 'identification' have been replaced with their respective *to*-infinitive (either explained in specific grammatical terms like these or in common words). The RD respondents who commented seem to have preferred the first example (although most RD respondents chose the second example as shown by the table), while the one (1) comment from the CG was in favour of the second example.

Table 10. Results from questionnaire question 9

Please specify your highest English education:			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
elementary school certificate	0% (0)	22.22% (2)	4.76% (2)
upper secondary school certificate	69.70% (23)	44.44% (4)	64.29% (27)
university/college degree	30.30% (10)	33.33% (3)	30.95% (13)

Table 10 shows that 23 of the RD respondents have an upper secondary school certificate in English, which may indicate that this is the certificate which at least almost the half of the department as a whole has, which consists of 56 of the personnel.

Table 11. Results from questionnaire question 10

Which of these statements do you agree with? (You may choose more than one.)			
Response alternatives:	Reporting department	Control group	Total
'The most important thing is that the final reports have all necessary content included.'	75.76% (25)	55.56% (5)	71.43% (30)
'The most important thing is that the readers can understand the final reports.'	87.88% (29)	100% (9)	90.48% (38)
'The most important thing is that the final reports are delivered to client with minimum revision history.'	18.18% (6)	0% (0)	14.29% (6)

The respondents were able choose more than one of the response alternatives for this question. Hence, the percentage values given in table 11 must be considered differently than those in the other tables in this study. For example, the total percentage 90.48% of respondents having chosen the second example sentence means that 90.48% of all 42 respondents have chosen it, but that some of them may have chosen more alternatives as well.

According to the results in this table, the RD respondents consider the two first alternatives almost equally important: that the MMT reports have all necessary content included and that the reports' intended readers can understand the reports.

4.4.1 Attitudes towards plain English

The questionnaire results indicate differing attitudes towards plain English, considering different aspects and sentences. The answers to question 8, for instance, show that both groups preferred the plain English version where nominalisations were substituted with *to-infinitives*. Question 2 shows that the reporting department preferred the original passive sentence rather than the active, plain English one. Depending on the context of the reports from where these questions' original sentences were drawn, the personnel's attitudes may naturally differ regarding whether or not plain English in each case is actually the version that would improve the reports' readability.

The result from question 7 deserves extra attention. The reporting department clearly preferred the plain English version, while the control group had an opposite attitude. As mentioned above, the control group respondent who commented on this question claimed that

the difficult terms beginning the first example sentence made this respondent choose the original sentence (the second example), which is not in plain English. The reporting department were perhaps more open to the plain English version because they, unlike the control group, are very familiar with the terms and concepts used in the MMT reports.

5 Discussion and conclusions

In this section, the results of this study are reviewed and discussed primarily in relation to the theoretical framework presented in section 2. Also presented below are suggestions for possible future studies that relate to the research area this study belongs to.

5.1 Potential proficiency needs

The aim of this study was to perform a needs analysis of MMT's reporting department, to find what possible language proficiency improvements may be made among the personnel and for the reports' readability, with help from a language consultant.

For some aspects of the text analysis, it is problematic to determine for what reason a certain choice has been made by the reporting department during the report writing process. An example is the use of the serial comma in lists, which I believe is left out not only because the reports are (or at least should be) written in British English, which suggests that using the serial comma is always optional, but because this comma is not used in Swedish (Språkrådet [The Language Council of Sweden] 2008), and as mentioned in section 1.1.2 most of the personnel have Swedish as their first language. As long as the reporting department stay consistent in their choice of using the serial comma or not, a potential need may be for them to be made aware of their individual writing styles, which may produce style mixes in the same report. Research on Swedes writing English has shown that punctuation is a difficult part for writers to get right (Barkho 2010:48). The results from the text analysis in this study have shown that punctuation indeed is complex, perhaps since the use differs between different authorities, and consequently also the guidelines. Another problematic factor concerning this is that the text analysis and questionnaire in no way reveal whether a certain use comes from a Swedish or a non-Swedish writer of MMT's reporting department.

Research on Swedish companies that have taken English as their corporate language suggests that personnel often find texts in English difficult to understand, which means that they spend a large amount of time on trying to understand those texts (Josephson & Jämtelid 2004:134–135). In their study, Josephson & Jämtelid examined the use of English in companies of this kind without specifically focusing on personnel who write, i.e. produce, English themselves. However, the results show that English is used mostly in written communication in those companies, especially on the higher corporate levels (Josephson & Jämtelid 2004). It is important to take the use of English into account also for the present

study, as any kind of use can indicate the level of language proficiency. Compared to Josephson & Jämtelid's results and in accordance with Apelman's findings (2010), this study has proven that MMT is a company where English is used even on the lower levels within the corporation, such as the reporting department (i.e. not managers). Interviewee C has explained that some personnel find it difficult to produce good written English (see section 4.3.1), and the questionnaire has indicated that the majority of the reporting department do not have any further English education than that of the upper secondary school – see section 4.4 table 10. Apelman also found that the strategy to consult already existing documents and texts in order to perform writing of high quality is a very common strategy in companies that have English as their corporate language (2010:138), and as mentioned by interviewee D (the report quality controller), MMT is no exception. The interview results from the present study indicate that personnel from MMT's reporting department believe proficiency improvements are needed in order to improve the quality of the reports' text parts that are often reused in different reports.

The interviewees seem to have identified a need for improvement within MMT's reporting department, however more general than specific needs. This result accords with the results from both Mobärg's (2012) and Apelman's (2010) studies that were presented in section 2.1.1. Further, Mobärg mentions that the more people use English, the higher they think of their own proficiency in the language (2012:159). The present study has shown that MMT's reporting department use English considerably, writing their reports in English, and that they, for that reason, may believe their English proficiency to be adequate already, or at least adequate enough so as to make them identify only general proficiency needs.

5.2 Personnel attitudes towards plain English

A major part of the needs analysis of the present study was to examine the personnel's attitudes towards plain English versions of report texts, as a part of finding out their current language proficiency needs, their opinions of their own proficiency, and to what extent they welcome language consultancy work. The attitudes towards plain English can be discussed using the questionnaire results specifically from questions 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 which were based on authentic report text examples. The attitudes are indicated by whether or not the respondents preferred the original or the plain English versions of the report texts studied. Comments for question 5 and 7 indicate that the personnel reflect on how to form a sentence and what the subject of a sentence is, and that the subject should come early for clarity.

Another indication from the comments is that the personnel who preferred the plain English versions often think about 'what and where' when they structure a sentence in a preferred way; 'what' (the main clause) should come first and 'where' (often adjuncts) should follow. The personnel who preferred the original sentences seemed to think that the reader is helped by 'where' being placed in the beginning of the sentence – this gives a mental image that the reader can keep in mind and which assists the reader through the rest of the sentence.

The personnel's attitudes towards plain English may be discussed in relation to Mobärg's study (2012). In part, Mobärg studied personnel's attitudes towards English language proficiency (2012:150) and the present study does the same for plain English. Plain English can be considered in relation to language proficiency as it is defined in this study (see section 1.1); from the point of view of language consultancy, I regard that if writers can write effectively in plain English, they have accomplished a certain level of language proficiency which enables them to identify and understand the target group of their texts, and plain English is very much focused on texts' intended readers (Cutts 2013; Petelin 2010). As mentioned in section 2.1.1, Mobärg found that the English proficiency of Astra Zeneca's personnel seemed to correlate with how positive they were towards English being the company's corporate language. The present study has not examined to what extent the reporting department personnel of MMT are positive towards having English as the corporate language, however the many comments to the questionnaire questions as well as the interviews indicate that the personnel strive to produce correct English in their reports and, if possible, improve their English proficiency continuously. This may be an indication that the personnel are overall positive towards English being the corporate language of MMT.

The reporting department personnel's attitudes towards and perceptions of comma usage is indicated by questionnaire question 7. Respondents refer to commas as indicating 'breaks' and 'pauses', a result which agrees with guidelines for comma usage (*Comma (,)* [online]; *New Oxford Style Manual* 2012). However, the attitudes differ in that some respondents claim that commas disrupt the sentence flow while others argue that commas provide pauses that make the sentence less long and therefore less difficult to read. An explanation to this may be that the reporting department are experts within their respective areas and may consequently consider that the readers of the MMT reports, the target group, always are equal experts. As mentioned by interviewee D, however, the target group must be regarded as possibly including non-experts too. So if writing as an expert in MMT's reporting

department it is important to be aware that a comma, in case a report is to be read by non-expert readers from the target group, may improve the sentence flow and 'smooth the path' (Cutts 2013:96) if used effectively.

5.3 Needs and language consultancy

Similar to Mobärg's study and his division of proficiency measure into 'self-assessed' and 'tested' proficiency (2012:150), the present study presents self-assessed proficiency primarily through the interviews with four of MMT's personnel. This enquiry of self-assessed proficiency, as discussed earlier in section 5, did not yield specific answers of areas for improvement. The interviewees seemed to have an idea that general proficiency improvement, though, is something they themselves as well as the whole reporting department need, and perhaps always need. To meet a general need of this kind, a language consultant could perform one of the most typical tasks of the profession: educate the personnel in writing through writing courses (*Språkkonsultprogrammet, 180 hp* [Language Consultancy Programme, 180 hec] [online]). Based on the present study's findings from the text analysis and the context surrounding the reports, that the target group must be considered for each case in order to identify potential non-expert readers, such a writing course would be focused on how to structure a sentence in a clear and concise way, how to use punctuation effectively, and how to write in plain English. All the aspects of the course would have the same aim, in the spirit of language consultancy: all personnel within MMT's reporting department should write with the target group in focus. Whenever the reporting department are writing for a target group not wholly consisting of scientists, the knowledge they would gain from such a writing course may assist them in their writing.

Apelman found in her study that companies generally do not have their own language reviewers, which means consulting such a person as a writer might not be possible (2010:138). The situation within MMT and the reporting department is different, because as mentioned the company has a report quality controller. This means that the personnel within MMT's reporting department can consult the report quality controller with any questions they might have during the report writing process, content or language related. However, the controller does not have a language background like, for example, a language consultant does, which the controller also pointed out during the interview. Can it then be supposed that the reporting department needs a language consultant to meet their English proficiency needs, in

addition to the report quality controller? The results from the text analysis of the MMT reports suggest that there exist proficiency needs within MMT's reporting department, needs which may occur when the target group is considered to include non-expert readers. Apart from the discussion in this section, the interviewees (see section 4.3.1) have confirmed that these needs could be met by a language consultant.

Apelman also found many of her results contradictive (2010), the same which applies to results in the present study. As mentioned in section 4.2.2, only one MMT report included a glossary. However, the majority of the reporting department think that marine specific concepts and terms are best explained in a glossary rather than in the text body (see table 2 in section 4.4). Why is it then, that none of the later reports analysed in this study have glossaries? Since the reports are technical and the target group may consist of experts as well as non-experts, it is perhaps extra important for the reporting department to know how to explain terms and concepts clearly. A language consultant could meet this potential need by putting together a glossary of all concepts and terms used in MMT reports that could be used as a base for creating specific glossaries for each project and report, with definitions also available in plain English considering the potential non-expert readers within the target group.

5.4 Conclusions

This section concludes the study by providing answers to each of the three research questions that were asked in section 1.2, in relation to the study aim and results.

What proficiency needs does a readability analysis of the reports expose? The analysis of the MMT reports has exposed proficiency needs primarily regarding punctuation, the use of cohesive devices, and sentence structure. MMT's reporting department may benefit from proficiency training in how to write technical language plainly, how to structure a sentence less left-heavy and avoid heavy noun phrases, how to explain terms and concepts in words appropriate for the target group, and how to use punctuation marks accurately in order to increase the readability of the MMT reports for possible non-experts of the reports' target group. Composition, as in the use of metatext, is found to be already used in the text body however not in the shape of glossaries (except one report), which the personnel consider the most effective way in which to explain specific terms and concepts. Further, the use of connectives is shown to be a device for improved readability that MMT already use, although somewhat inconsistently.

How do the personnel perceive plain English versions of authentic report texts and what attitudes towards plain English do they have? The questionnaire has shown that the personnel's attitudes differ when it comes to plain English versions of report texts. For example, to use punctuation and commas especially was perceived as a good pause in the text by some and bad for the sentence flow by others. The questionnaire responses and comments have also shown that the reporting department personnel, during the writing process, reflect on how to structure a sentence in a clear way; however they may not think of it explicitly as writing in plain English or non-plain English. The responses to questionnaire question 10, see table 11 in section 4.4, indicate that the reporting department put much value to that the MMT reports are understood by the readers, which this study has identified as may be experts as well as non-experts. Thus, it could be concluded that the reporting department might be, at the very least implicitly, positive towards plain English as a way of writing in order to aid non-expert readers.

What perceptions of language proficiency and needs do the personnel have? The interviews and the questionnaire, with many comments and reflections from the respondents, have indicated that the personnel are overall positive towards improving their language proficiency. The results of this study have shown that the MMT reporting department perhaps consider their language proficiency to be adequate, but at the same time view general proficiency improvement as a continuous need.

5.5 Future studies

In future studies, an analysis could be carried out to study what happens to the language between report revisions, what comments are given by the clients, and how a company or authority revise their texts in order to meet their clients' requests. This idea was considered during the initial stages of planning for this study. However, considering this study's limited space and scope, the analysis had to be narrowed down and therefore this idea was left out.

Another possible future study could be to carry out a needs analysis to examine whether there are different English proficiency needs between Swedish personnel and non-Swedish personnel within a company or authority in Sweden.

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7 Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview questions

1. Hur går ditt arbete till på MMTs rapporteringsavdelning, hur ser en arbetsdag ut?
   (Can you describe your work day at MMT's reporting department?)

2. Vilka eventuella svårigheter möter du i ditt arbete med tanke på att engelska är företagets koncernspråk?
   (What possible difficulties do you encounter during your work since English is the company's corporate language?)

3. Hur arbetar du och tänker kring tydligt, välförståeligt språk i rapporterna?
   (How do you work and think regarding clear, well understandable language in the reports?)

4. Vilken mottagare tänker du dig att rapporterna har och vilken språklig färdighet kan denna förväntas ha?
   (Who do you think are the target group of the reports and what language proficiency may this group be expected to have?)

5. Hur upplever du att du behöver förbättra din språkliga färdighet?
   (How do you perceive that you need to improve your language proficiency?)

6. Vad upplever du att rapporteringsavdelningen i sin helhet har för behov av språkliga färdighetsförbättringar?
   (What needs do you perceive the reporting department as a whole has regarding language proficiency improvements?)

7. På vilket sätt tänker du att en utomstående person med utbildning i språk och kommunikation kan tillgodose detta behov?
   (In what way do you think an outside person with education in language and communication can meet this need?)

8. Vilka språkfärdigheter anser du är viktiga att ha i din yrkesposition?
   (What language proficiencies do you regard as important to have in your position of work?)

Additional questions (for the report quality controller):

9. Hur viktig anser du läsbarheten i rapporterna vara?
   (How important do you regard the readability of the reports to be?)
10. Om du fick ändra något i rapporternas format, struktur och/eller språk, vad skulle det vara och varför?
    (If you could change anything in the reports' format, structure and/or language, what would that be and why?)

Appendix 2 – Questionnaire questions

The questionnaire along with its title and initial description is reproduced in this appendix without the specific format in which it was made in the online survey programme (*SurveyMonkey* [https://sv.surveymonkey.com/]). For questions 2, 5, 7, and 8 which include authentic text from MMT reports, the response alternatives are given an explanation in italicised brackets after each alternative. These brackets were not present in the questionnaire that the respondents received.

How do you perceive MMT's reports in relation to plain English?

This questionnaire includes authentic, anonymised text from MMT reports.

As noted above, the main purpose of this survey is to examine how you perceive MMT reports in relation to so-called 'plain English', and what you think of plain English versions of authentic report excerpts. This raises the question 'what is plain English?'.
Plain English is the kind of English that is written with the reader in mind; text in plain English is clear, readable, and concise, without being oversimplifying.
Unlike bureaucratic English, plain English reaches out to a broad audience.

1. How do you think technical terms and marine specific concepts are best explained in a report?
   a. in text
   b. in a separate glossary
   c. in either of the above
   d. no explanation is necessary
   Comment:

2. Rank these sentences after how you perceive the message is delivered: very clearly (1), quite clearly (2), vaguely (3). (You can also use drag-and-drop.)
   a. The location of the two pipelines was provided by the client as a .shp file (FILENAME). *(the original, anonymised and with corrected verb-modifier)*
   b. The client provided the location of the two pipelines as a .shp file (FILENAME). *(my plain English version: the passive sentence is made active)*
   c. As a .shp file (FILENAME), the location of the two pipelines was provided by the client. *(my version, non-plain English)*

3. Which synonym would you choose for the meaning 'to do something':
   a. perform
   b. conduct
   c. carry out
   d. Other (please specify)
4. According to you, who is the primary receiver and reader of MMT's reports?

   (Answer box)
5. Which one of these sentences do you consider the most readable, (i.e. the easiest to read and understand)?
   a. At four proposed Met Mast locations within the X Zone, further detailed data acquisition was undertaken for the installation of meteorological monitoring masts, each of which was 1 km² in size. *(my version, with the phrases switched and commas inserted, non-plain English)*
   b. Further detailed data acquisition was undertaken within the X Zone at four proposed Met Mast locations for the installation of meteorological monitoring masts each of which was 1 km² in size. *(the original, anonymised)*
   c. Further detailed data acquisition was undertaken within the X Zone at four proposed Met Mast locations for the installation of meteorological monitoring masts, each of which was 1 km² in size. *(my version, with a comma inserted, non-plain English)*

   Comment:
6. Read the following sentence: '*The photo resolution makes it possible to identify biota to lowest taxonomic level practicable at all stations where visibility was acceptable*'. In the box below, rewrite the sentence by inserting a comma to separate its two clauses (i.e. its two parts):

   (Answer box)
7. Choose the sentence you think is most clear and readable, and comment on why:
   a. In the nearshore parts of the route, both in the north and south, bedrock outcrops and coarse sediment interpreted as diamicton are present. *(the original, anonymised)*

b. Bedrock outcrops and coarse sediment interpreted as diamicton are present in the nearshore parts of the route, both in the north and south. *(my plain English version: less left-heavy sentence)*

Comment:

8. Choose the alternative you prefer:
   a. Side scan sonar data has been used for interpretation of surface geology and identification of seabed features and objects. *(the original, anonymised)*
   b. Side scan sonar data has been used to interpret surface geology and identify seabed features and objects. *(my plain English version: nominalisations are replaced with to-infinitives)*
   c. I think the above sentences are equal and prefer either of them.

   Comment:

9. Please specify your highest English education:
   a. elementary school certificate
   b. upper secondary school certificate
   c. university/college degree

10. Which of these statements do you agree with? (You may choose more than one.)
    a. 'The most important thing is that the final reports have all necessary content included.'
    b. 'The most important thing is that the readers can understand the final reports.'
    c. 'The most important thing is that the final reports are delivered to client with minimum revision history.'