Teaching literature in upper-secondary English class
A qualitative study of Swedish teachers’ approaches and experiences

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Abstract

The reasons for incorporating literature in foreign language classrooms range from increased language proficiency and gaining cultural experience to increasing literary knowledge. In Swedish upper-secondary school, literature inclusion is advocated by the course curriculum, but with few specifics as to how teachers should approach it. This study investigates how teachers approach literature teaching, what their ideals for their teaching are, and what difficulties they experience when teaching. These questions were addressed in semi-structured interviews with seven upper-secondary school teachers. The data was analyzed using Content Analysis.

The results show that the teachers viewed the role of literature as a way to enhance students’ social and cultural awareness, as well as their language proficiency. The teachers emphasized maintaining and cultivating students’ interests by choosing literature that contain themes relatable and interesting to students, as well as by enthusing students when introducing the texts. When working with the texts the most common assignments and exercises were based on literary analysis and subjective student reflection. The biggest constraint perceived by the teachers were unmotivated and uninterested students. A possible conclusion to be drawn from the research is that it is increasingly important for teachers to connect to students’ needs and interests when incorporating literature. A suggestion for further research is therefore to investigate students’ perceptions and experiences with literature in English class. In addition, the efficiency of literature teaching approaches needs to be researched, as this area is fairly unexplored.

Keywords: upper-secondary school, Sweden, EFL, teaching English, approaches to literature, language proficiency, literary analysis, extensive reading, reflective exercises.
# Table of contents

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Problem area, purpose and research question ................................................................. 1

2. Background .......................................................................................................................... 2  
   2.1 The course curriculum and literature in English class ...................................................... 2  
   2.2 A brief historical overview of literature in foreign language education ......................... 3  
   2.3 Previous research into the effectiveness of reading in EFL and ESL ............................ 3  
   2.4 Approaching literature in the foreign language classroom ............................................. 5

3. Method ................................................................................................................................ 8  
   3.1 Data collection ............................................................................................................... 9  
      3.1.1 The interviews ....................................................................................................... 9  
      3.1.2 The interviewees ................................................................................................. 9  
   3.2 Data analysis ............................................................................................................... 10  
   3.3 Ethical aspects ............................................................................................................. 11

4. Results and discussion ........................................................................................................ 11  
   4.1 The importance of literature according to the teachers .............................................. 11  
      4.1.1 Discussion ........................................................................................................... 12  
   4.2 Teachers’ thoughts on different types of literature ..................................................... 13  
      4.2.1 Discussion ........................................................................................................... 14  
   4.3 How the teachers incorporate literature ..................................................................... 15  
      4.3.1 Discussion ........................................................................................................... 17  
   4.4 Teachers’ perceived constraints when working with literature ................................ 18  
      4.4.1 Discussion ........................................................................................................... 19

5. Summary and conclusion ................................................................................................... 20

References ............................................................................................................................. 21

Appendix 1 ................................................................................................................................ 23

Appendix 2 ................................................................................................................................ 24
1. Introduction

The main reason I wanted to become an English teacher four years ago was my interest in literature. Throughout my education the reasons for becoming a teacher have multiplied many times over, but literature remains an important focal point. During my VFU (supervised placement) periods, I got to practice and experiment with literature in the classroom, and I encountered both possibilities and constraints. I witnessed students who were intrigued and enthused by literature, as well as students frustrated and unmotivated by it. Questions regarding how to approach literature in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context arose. How do teachers balance the linguistic, the literary and the cultural aspects? How do teachers find material, and why do they make the material selection they do?

The reasons for teaching literature in Swedish upper-secondary school English are multifaceted. The education shall give the students opportunities to develop their linguistic skills as well as their cultural and literary knowledge according to the Curriculum for the upper-secondary school, abbreviated Lgy11 (Skolverket, 2011). The course curriculum, however, does not specify what literature should be taught, or how. This means that it is largely up to the individual teachers to decide how much or how little literature is included in a course as well as what types, and how they include the material. With different reasons to incorporate literature in the foreign language classroom in mind, the question of how English teachers in Swedish upper-secondary school actually approach literature arises, and what ideals and constraints they might experience.

1.1 Problem area, purpose and research question

The aim of this study is to gain knowledge regarding how a number of teachers approach the teaching of literature in upper-secondary school English education in Sweden. The focus is on how they view the role of literature and on how they incorporate it. By exploring such matters, successful approaches can be identified as well as potential difficulties, which may be of use in the development of efficient teaching practices. More specifically, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. How do some upper-secondary English teachers in Sweden approach literature in English classrooms?
2. What are these teachers’ ideals when it comes to working with literature in English class?

3. What are some common difficulties experienced by these teachers when working with literature in English class?

2. Background

2.1 The course curriculum and literature in English class

In Swedish upper-secondary school, English is a core subject mandatory for every student. The education focuses on four broad skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also emphasizes cultural and societal aspects (Skolverket, 2011). These broad areas of learning are reflected in the formulations of the course curriculum regarding what the students should be given an opportunity to develop, namely:

1. Understanding of spoken and written English, and also the ability to interpret the content.
2. The ability to express oneself and communicate in English in speech and writing.
3. The ability to use different language strategies in different contexts.
4. The ability to adapt the language to different purposes, recipients and contexts.
5. The ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. (Skolverket, 2011, n.p.)

For the individual English courses, fiction in different forms is mentioned as a central content. There are three English courses in Swedish upper-secondary school: English 5, 6 and 7. Only English 5 is mandatory for all programs, while English 6 is mandatory for many programs and English 7 is always optional. For English 5, literature and other fiction is mentioned as central content, but with no examples being provided. For English 6, both “[t]hemes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods” and “[c]ontemporary and older literature, poetry, drama and songs” (Skolverket, 2011 n.p.) are listed. For English 7, “[c]ontemporary and older literature and other fiction in various genres such as drama” (Skolverket, 2011 n.p.) are mentioned. The teaching of literature is clearly advocated, in other words, and some specifics regarding what is to be taught are given. However, Lgy11 does not provide any details as to how literature should be taught by teachers, or exactly what works should be chosen. This means that in many cases it is up to the individual teacher to make such decisions. It seems, however, that the course curriculum presents two broadly defined
aims regarding the use of literature in English education: (1) reading for language learning and (2) reading for gaining social and cultural understanding.

2.2 A brief historical overview of literature in foreign language education

By studying articles published in the *Modern Language Journal* during the 20th century, Kramsch and Kramsch (2000) investigated the role of literature in foreign language teaching from a historical perspective, with particular interest given to the United States. As early as 1918, a debate had started regarding “reading for content versus reading for form and style, the moral value of literature, the cognitive and cultural benefits of a literary education, and literature as the embodiment of national pride” (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000, p. 556). During the 1950s literature was deemed to be less appropriate for lower-level learners and became increasingly associated with advanced learners. This is in part attributed to the rise of the audiolingual method at the time, leading to literature being seen as merely an entertaining addition to practicing patterns. Only when students reached higher levels of learning was literature considered appropriate due to its ideational content. From 1979 to 1999 literature as authentic text was dominant, in the wake of the rising proficiency movement. The primary concerns around this time were practical skill and communicative competence, leading to literature being viewed as a tool for “vocabulary acquisition, the development of reading strategies, and the training of critical thinking” (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000, p. 567).

A more recent trend regarding the inclusion of literature in foreign language teaching is described by Hall (2015), who discerns an increasing emphasis on culture. One part of this movement can be seen in the key curriculum document Common European Framework which “increasingly references ideas of culture and intercultural movement” (Hall, 2015, p. 134). Traces of this shift, from proficiency to culturally oriented literature teaching, can be seen in the two following sections (2.3 and 2.4) where previous research into the effectiveness of reading as well as contemporary approaches is investigated.

2.3 Previous research into the effectiveness of reading in EFL and ESL

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of reading on second and foreign language learners. Pitts, White and Krashen (1989) found that adult learners of English as a second language (ESL) made small, but significant, gains in vocabulary knowledge after reading two chapters from the novel *A Clockwork Orange*, even without preparation or instructions. Robb and Susser (1989) found that extensive reading (a novel...
with more than 500 pages in this case) was at least as effective in teaching English to Japanese college students as working with reading-skills text books. Lao and Krashen (2000) conducted a study investigating university level EFL learners in Hong Kong where one group participated in a literature class and the other group in a traditional English class focused on speaking, writing, listening and reading non-fiction. The literature class, who read for content and enjoyment, outperformed the other class in terms of vocabulary and reading rate improvement. 88% of the students from the literature class but only 12% from the other class felt that they had learnt something from their classes. In a similar study Yang (2001) studied four ESL classes in a Hong Kong school with non-academic adult learners: two of the classes studied a course text book while the other two read mystery novels in addition to the course text book. According to the results, students in the literature classes made substantial proficiency gains in addition to feeling more motivated in comparison to the other classes.

These previous studies lend support to the proclaimed value of reading when learning a second or foreign language. Not only does reading seem to lead to increased language proficiency, but it is also motivating in many cases. However, one aspect to note is that the research cited was conducted at universities or elsewhere with adult learners, so it cannot be said to accurately represent, for example, upper-secondary students’ learning situations. Another aspect to note is that the focus seems to have been on vocabulary acquisition and language proficiency, as opposed to social and cultural awareness. By relating these studies to the previously provided historical overview (see section 2.2), it seems as if language proficiency, and not cultural or personal growth, has long been the focus of interest in the study of literature in a foreign language context.

In an effort to investigate the effectiveness of different approaches in teaching literature in EFL, Divsar and Abdorreza (2009) conducted a study with 120 university students majoring in English in Iran. The students were divided into two groups, one experimental and one control group. For the experimental group an integrated approach was used and for the control group an instructor-led approach. The integrated approach comprised three phases: the linguistic phase, where students were given a vocabulary list corresponding to the reading material; the cultural phase, which consisted of teacher-led lectures providing students with necessary context as well as students giving lectures on theoretical bases with input from the teacher; and the communicative phase, where the students first read aloud from sections of the assigned reading and then discussed selected topics. The other, teacher-led, approach was described as only consisting of teacher-led lectures which aimed at providing students with
necessary information. At the end of the semester the students were given a test consisting of three sections: a linguistic, an interpretive and a cultural section. The test results showed that the integrated approach was more effective, suggesting that an eclectic or multi-step approach should be utilized when including literature in EFL education (Divsar & Abdorreza, 2009).

2.4 Approaching literature in the foreign language classroom

As previously demonstrated in section 2.1, the different types, or genres, of literature to be taught in upper-secondary English are not explicitly stated in Lgy11 (with the exception of drama and songs in English 6). However, a discussion of some pedagogical differences between poetry, short stories, novels and dramas is put forth by Parkinson and Reid Thomas (2000). Poetry is described as the most problematic for foreign language students due to its linguistic complexity and students’ inexperience with it. Short stories on the other hand, is described as the most straight forward due to its often short length, while novels present the teacher with the challenge of finding enjoyable and suitable novels, despite their length. Drama, like poetry, is often difficult for students because of their inexperience with it, but can provide a source of topics for discussion as well as opportunities to practice spoken language through the use of scripted dialogue (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000).

To integrate literature in English classrooms in Swedish upper-secondary school is, as previously stated (see section 2.1), mandatory according to Lgy11, perhaps because previous research has found it to be beneficial for learners (see section 2.3). However, Edmondson (1995) argues against literature as having a special role to play in the foreign language classroom. He claims that there is no empirical evidence for literary texts leading to greater language acquisition than non-literary texts, and that “[t]he fact that you can, as it were, smuggle a bit of language into your teaching of literature is not a justification for literature being there in the first place” (p. 46). Furthermore, he asserts that arguments regarding literature as a gateway to cultural access are highly implausible, maintaining that there are no apparent connections between language proficiency and cultural insight, and that literature does not necessarily provide cultural insight. In response to Edmondson’s claims Paran (2008) asserts that this type of argumentation takes “the learner as a person out of the equation: the focus is on the text, and on the learner as a language learning machine” (Paran, 2008, p. 469). Paran maintains that interest in and love of literature is a human characteristic, thus making its inclusion suitable in foreign language classrooms.
A similar claim regarding the role of literature in foreign language classrooms is presented by Sage (1987), who describes literature as having an inherent interest to people. This derives from the potential of stories to present situations, ideas, issues, characters and places that interest and intrigue us. However, Sage (1987) presents three reasons for teaching literature in a second language context: the cultural, the linguistic and the educational. The cultural aspect of literature concerns its potential of providing a link to the target culture. Sage asserts that “[l]iterature both overcomes many barriers between cultures and exposes them so that readers may become more responsive to them and improve their communication across cultures” (Sage, 1987, p. 14). The linguistic importance stems from literature’s representation of skillful language use. By reading literature students experience different communicative strategies while being exposed to new vocabulary and complex syntax. Literature can also aid students’ listening ability when being read aloud and can improve speaking and writing via oral discussions and written assignments. Sage’s (1987) claim regarding the educational value of literature stems from a will to move EFL away from a utilitarian function where language education merely serves as skill attainment. Literature can provide the EFL classroom with opportunities to convey knowledge contributing not only to language learning, but all learning.

A more detailed approach to incorporating literature in foreign language education is described by Barette, Paesani and Vinall (2010). It aims at developing students’ translingual and transcultural competence (i.e the ability to operate between languages and cultural perspectives) by focusing on literary, stylistic and cultural elements of literature. The literary aspects concern literary trends such as Romanticism and Realism as well as genres such as novel, short story and poetry. They also include the analysis of themes, narratives and rhetorical devices. Stylistics concerns the study of lexical and grammatical features of a text, particularly “the effect of language use on readers’ interpretation of the text” (Barette et al., 2010, p. 219). The cultural elements of literature that are examined consist of perspectives, practices and products. Perspectives include meanings, values, attitudes, and ideas, while practices include patterns of social interaction, and products include foods, laws, music, games and literary texts. By focusing on these cultural elements students are provided with opportunities to make crosscultural comparisons and to familiarize themselves with the target culture. The interweaving of the literary, stylistic and cultural elements is an example of how teachers can approach the inclusion of literature in a comprehensive way.
The reasons for incorporating literature in EFL education are varied and so are the approaches. In an investigation regarding teachers’ approaches in Dutch upper-secondary school, Bloemert, Jansen and van de Grift (2016) synthesized several foreign language literature teaching approaches, among them Sage’s (1987), Divsar and Abdorreza’s (2009), and Barette, Paesani and Vinall’s (2010). Their synthesis resulted in four categories: the text, context, reader and language approaches; combined they create what Bloemert et al. (2016) call the comprehensive approach.

The text approach is concerned with the study of literature as such. The students learn to discuss concepts which are common in theoretical literary discourses, such as genre, setting, plot, theme and characters. Students are made aware of differences between genres and writing styles, and by learning about aspects such as theme and characters they are trained in literary analysis. The context approach deals with cultural, historical and social contexts surrounding literature. When working with specific books this could entail looking extra carefully at the authors’ background and how it might have influenced their work, the political or religious factors surrounding the writing of the book, the literary epoch which the book was written on or influenced by, and the cultural factors which shaped the book. The goal of this approach is to broaden the students’ awareness of factors surrounding literature. The reader approach emphasizes the reader and engages the students as independent makers of meanings. In this approach students are encouraged to connect the studied material to their own experiences and lives, to critically think about topics known or unknown to them, and also to develop their interest in reading. The language approach, finally, regards literature as a tool for language learning. One way this approach is practiced is through extensive reading, building upon the idea that by reading longer texts students will pick up new words and internalize linguistic structures. Another way is to focus on specific grammatical features in a text by, for example, looking at sentence structure, or at lexis by giving extra attention to vocabulary and/or idiomatic expressions (Bloemert et al., 2016).

Using the four different approaches, Bloemert et al. (2016) investigated how Dutch EFL teachers at upper-secondary school approached literature in English class, and also if the teachers’ gender, the number of years spent teaching or curricular factors were related to the reported occurrence of the literary teaching approaches. The results showed that the text approach occurred most frequently and the language approach least, but that all approaches occurred regularly, indicating that most teachers use a mix of approaches. There was no significant correlation between approaches and gender or years spent teaching. However, the
context approach occurred more frequently in the last year and less in the first year of upper-secondary English studies, suggesting that as students become more proficient in both language and literature, teachers opt to include more historical and cultural factors in the analysis.

In an effort to gain an understanding of students’ perspectives on literature in English education Bloemert, Paran, Jansen and van de Grift (2017) conducted a survey among 635 Dutch upper-secondary students. Using the four approaches previously mentioned (text, context, reader and language approach) the researchers asked the students one question: “What do you think are the benefits of EFL literature lessons?” (Bloemert et al., 2017, p. 5). The answers were then assigned according to the approach they seemed to match. The students’ answers could correspond to more than one approach, however. The results of the survey showed that 74% of the students mentioned topics related to the language approach, while 56% of the answers fit the context approach, 33% the reader approach and 12% the text approach.

Interestingly, there was thus a noteworthy discrepancy between the teachers’ and the students’ answers. While teachers seemed to focus on the text approach, only 12% of students considered it to be of use. Conversely, 56% of the students considered the language approach to be most beneficial while it was the least occurring approach according to the teachers. This finding seems to suggest that teachers and students may approach and view literature differently, and that choices and preferences regarding literature studies may have to be discussed more between them.

Given the similarities between Bloemert, Jansen and van de Grift’s (2016) study, and the aim of the present study, the four approaches introduced here will be used in the discussion of the results presented below in section 4.

3. Method

Considering the aim of investigating Swedish teachers’ thoughts and experiences regarding the inclusion and study of literature in English classrooms, qualitative interviews were deemed suitable as the method of data collection. According to Davidson and Patel (2003) qualitative interviews let the researcher discover the interviewees’ perceptions on subjects or, in Brinkmann and Kvale’s (2014) words, through qualitative interviews we can understand the world from the interviewees’ perspective.
3.1 Data collection

The first stage, after the research questions and themes had been identified, was to formulate interview questions and create an interview guide (see Appendix 1). The interview guide featured the most vital interview questions with suggestions on follow-up questions. The next stage was to get in contact with upper-secondary English teachers. This was done by emailing principals who could provide contact information to English teachers and also by contacting English teachers directly. Approximately 70 teachers (including those contacted via principals) were explained the aim and topic of the planned interview (see Appendix 2), and seven teachers were interested and able to participate.

3.1.1 The interviews

The interviews were conducted over a five-week period, which was necessary to accommodate the teachers’ schedules. All of the interviews took place at the participants’ respective schools. The interviews were recorded with a phone, which the teachers had consented to. Before the interview started the participants were informed once again about what the interview and study entailed and why I was interested in the subject and their thoughts.

The interviews were semi-structured. Some questions deemed crucial for answering the research questions were asked in all the interviews. However, depending on the interviewees’ answers different follow-up questions were asked in each interview. Even though the participants were all English teachers the interviews were held in Swedish. This was done because both interviewer and interviewees are native speakers of Swedish, and so the communication of complex or abstract ideas would not be hindered by potential language barriers. The length of the interviews ranged from 27 to 45 minutes, and a total of 243 minutes were recorded.

3.1.2 The interviewees

All seven informants were upper-secondary teachers representing five schools in two Swedish cities. Three of the teachers were male and four female. The teachers’ experience ranged from ten years of teaching English to 30 years. To preserve the participants’ anonymity, they will be referred to by the labels T1-T7. The participants’ gender, years spent teaching English and which courses they taught at the time of the interview were as follows:
T1: male, 18 years, English 7.
T2: female, 20 years, English 5 and 7.
T3: male, 18 years, English 6 and 7.
T4: female, 27 years, English 5 and 6.
T5: female, 10 years, English 7.
T6: male, 30 years, English 5, 6 and 7.
T7: female, 12 years, English 6 and 7.

It should be noted that all of the teachers had previously taught the other upper-secondary English courses not listed for them as well. Also of importance is the fact that T6’s students have neurodevelopmental disorders, which means that he has comparatively few students and works individually with each of them than the other teachers do in their classes.

3.2 Data analysis

Content Analysis as described by Bryman (2008) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), was used to analyze the data. Content Analysis consists of coding and creating categories for the informants’ answers. The coding was performed continuously during the five-week period during which the interviews were carried out. After each interview, the recording was listened to and parts that were of interest were written down, given a code and timestamped. The parts that were of interest were selected based on their relevance to the research questions. The codes ranged from choosing of literature and types of assignments to teacher education and more. Because the interviews were held in Swedish the transcription also entailed translation into English. The sentences quoted in the the results section below have been adapted to make them more readable, as many of them were incomplete and/or featured filler words. However, the information and views conveyed in the quotes have been represented as faithfully as possible.

When all seven interviews had been conducted and the recordings had been coded once, the process was repeated. This was done in order to verify the categorizations of the data and identify possible relevant information previously unaccounted for. The codes, including the passages subsumed under them, were compared and contrasted in order to identify broader categorizations corresponding to the research questions. The following categories were identified: The importance of literature according to the teachers, the teachers’ thoughts on different types of literature, how the teachers incorporate literature and finally the teachers’ perceived constraints when working with literature.
3.3 Ethical aspects

The interviewed teachers were informed of the ethical aspects concerning their participation. They were informed that their identities would be kept completely anonymous, which is why they are referred to by a number and the names of their schools and the cities in which they are situated remain undisclosed. The teachers were also informed that the interview recordings would only be used in present study. The ethical aspects were handled in accordance with the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002).

4. Results and discussion

In the following section the results and discussions are presented. Each subsection contains a presentation of the empirical data, followed by a discussion of the findings.

4.1 The importance of literature according to the teachers

All of the teachers declared some aspect of personal growth to be an important aspect of reading literature. T2 stated that one of the central aspects of incorporating literature is to cultivate students’ interest in reading because if students enjoy reading, other important aspects such as language and literary knowledge will follow. Similarly, T3 answered the question “what do you consider to be one of the most important aspects of teaching literature” with:

It is fun to read. The day we lose that, we will not get them to read, and if we do not get them to read, then they will not develop the language, they will not attain an understanding of the culture, they will not understand themselves. They will not develop as humans, individuals or language practitioners.

T1, T4, T5, T6 and T7 described an important aspect of literature as the broadening of students’ social and cultural awareness. As T5 put it, “literature is an invaluable treasure when it comes to learning about different societies and cultures”, a sentiment which was expanded upon by T7 who said “an important aspect is that the students get to see things from different perspectives”. Collectively these teachers’ answers painted a picture of literature as providing students with opportunities to see the world and gain new perspectives on what it means to be human.

Language development was another important aspect of reading reported by all teachers. T7 explained that if students read, their writing becomes better, and T5 maintained that reading
literature is key to developing comprehension of English. T4 mentioned that literature gives students the opportunity to learn new words and phrases, while T6 suggested that students learn idiomatic expressions from literature.

4.1.1 Discussion
The results suggest that teachers ideally incorporate and work with literature using what Bloemert et al. (2016) call the context, reader and language approaches. Based upon what the teachers emphasized, the reader and context approaches seem to be what motivates the inclusion of literature most often, closely followed by the language approach.

The text approach is surprisingly absent from the teachers’ descriptions of important aspects, though it was reported as the most frequently occurring approach among the Dutch teachers in Bloemert et al. (2016). Although the reason for the absence of claimed advantages corresponding to the text approach can only be speculated on.

The context and reader approach are in some ways interwoven in the teachers’ formulations. As reported, two teachers highlighted the importance of cultivating students’ interest in reading, which would be categorized as the reader approach, but the underlying goal could be construed as related to the context approach, as when T3 mentions “understanding of culture” as a reason why reading is important. Also, the overarching aim for all of the teachers seems to be the development of students’ cultural knowledge by broadening their understanding of themselves and the world, suggesting that in this case it is difficult to separate the two approaches. This aim is related to Sage’s (1987) claim of the cultural and educational value of literature as the goal of its inclusion is not mere skill attainment, but a broadening of students’ cultural understanding as well as learning about the world at large. This view of literature’s role in EFL can also be connected to Lgy11. According to Lgy11 the education shall, among other things, give students the opportunity to develop “[t]he ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket, 2011, n.p), which are sentiments reflected in the teachers’ formulations regarding literature’s importance.

The prevalence of the language approach clearly demonstrates that teachers view the inclusion of literature as beneficial in language development. As mentioned in section 2.3 this view is supported by several studies, especially when it comes to extensive reading (Lao & Krashen, 2000) (Robb & Susser, 1989) (Yang, 2001).
4.2 Teachers’ thoughts on different types of literature

All of the teachers reported that they use and see a value in incorporating different types of literature (novels, short stories, poems and music lyrics). Novels and short stories were reported by all teachers as most frequently used.

T1 explained that he frequently uses short stories because it is easier to find the time for shorter texts than for novels, and T5 described short stories as appropriate because she can go over several completely different topics during one semester with the students. T6, who has a lot of one-on-one time with students, often reads short stories together with them by taking turns reading aloud. T7 explained that she finds short stories suitable for English 7 as they are less time consuming than novels, especially since they also have a lot of writing and speaking to get to during the course.

Poetry, lyrics and drama were the least used, according to the teachers. T2 never uses music lyrics because she does not find it enjoyable, but she incorporates poetry in English 7. The reason she does not use poetry in earlier courses is her experience that students find the genre too abstract and difficult. This sentiment was echoed by T1, who mentioned that many students have difficulties with poetry. He thinks it is because very few of them have come into contact with poetry before upper-secondary school. T5 does not use poetry because she does not like to read poetry herself, but she recognizes that it can be useful in English 7, where she thinks that students should be exposed to several types of texts. T7 perceived poetry to be extra difficult to work with, saying that:

In upper-secondary, students have to think a lot on their own, which they find very difficult. I can imagine that poetry is just like that but magnified for students; it is so much about bringing forth your own thoughts, and you have to read poems over and over again to understand them, which many students have a really hard time with.

Music lyrics were mentioned by T3 as a good source for vocabulary exercises and as an introduction to literary analysis in English 5. He incorporates a poetry section in English 7 only, with poems ranging from Shakespearean to contemporary ones.

T1, T3 and T7 were the only ones to mention drama as included in their classes, and only in the form of Shakespeare. The reason for the other teachers’ exclusion of drama was not explained or delved deeper into.
When choosing pieces of literature to use in class, all of the teachers expressed that they themselves need to enjoy the material to be able to teach it well. One exception was mentioned by T2 and T3, who both teach the novel *Missing* by Catherine MacPhail in English 5. Both teachers strongly disliked the book, but in evaluations students consistently rated it as highly enjoyable, so both continue to include it in order to motivate students to read. T1 explained that choosing literature for class is almost like creating a personal canon. His list of literature included in class is constantly evolving by incorporating different texts and subsequently evaluating the response of the students.

T3 described that the most important aspect when choosing literature is the group and their strengths as well as areas in need of improvement. He also tries to account for the groups’ interests. For instance, if a group is interested in sports he tries to find literature connected to that specific interest. The groups’ interests can also concern their social needs. He described one such situation where something akin to bullying was occurring in a group. In an effort to remedy the situation, which he described as “not exactly full-fledged bullying, but there was something that was not alright in the group”, he chose Stephen King’s *Carrie* for the group to read. The book, which features a bullied main character who develops supernatural powers, provided great discussions where they “could make beautiful connections between fiction and reality”, leading to the group reflecting on how they treat each other. However, he was careful to point out that had the problem been more severe, choosing to read *Carrie* might have been counterproductive.

In a similar manner, T5 also emphasized student interest as important when finding and choosing literature, adding that “you cannot satisfy everyone’s wishes, needs and interests, but it is important that you take the time to talk to students about what they like”. She also tries to find material that connects to contemporary issues and was, for example, looking forward to using the novel *The Hate U Give*, which deals with police brutality in the USA. T7 pointed out that the texts she chooses needs to be discussable, meaning that the texts needs to be relatable to students.

4.2.1 Discussion

The reason behind the frequent use of short stories seems connected to the fact that teachers can present and touch upon several topics in a short amount of time. This might be connected to the previously discussed ideal of working within the *context approach* (see section 4.1.1), since the incorporation of short stories is often motivated by the fact that they facilitate the
introduction of plenty of topics in an efficient manner. This reason is also connected with Parkinson and Reid Thomas’ (2000) description of short stories as the most straightforward of the genres.

The difficulties described when it comes to working with poetry might be the reason it is kept for the last and most advanced course, English 7. An implication of this is likely to be that most upper-secondary English students are not faced with poetry in English class, due to English 7 being completely optional. It is, however, worth noting that poetry is mentioned explicitly in Lgy11 for English 6, as is drama and songs (Skolverket, 2011). Interestingly, none of these genres were explicitly mentioned by the teachers for English 6, it was rather spread across the courses, most commonly being included in English 7.

The perceived difficulties of incorporating poetry may be connected to the teachers’ previously reported (see section 4.1.1) inclination of working in accordance with the reader and context approaches. A reason for this might be that some of the teachers perceive students as not understanding or enjoying poetry. If the goal is to motivate and stimulate an interest in reading, poetry may be regarded as unworthy of the trouble and perhaps even as counterproductive.

When choosing what is to be read in class the most prominent factors reported were the teachers’ own enjoyment of the material and the students’ interests. This can be seen as exemplifying how the reader approach influences not only why the teachers work with literature (as described in section 4.1.1), but also what literature they include. What the teachers classified as students’ interest were a) what students express they are interested in and b) what teachers deem to be in the interest of the students’ development. The latter encompasses what teachers perceive as students’ English-development needs, a group’s social interests (as in the Carrie example), and what students might be interested in discussing (which includes contemporary issues). The choosing of literature can therefore be seen as related to the reader, context, and language approaches (Bloemert et al., 2016).

### 4.3  How the teachers incorporate literature

One aspect which four of the teachers emphasized as crucial when incorporating literature was the introductory phase. T2 maintained that “the worst thing you can do is to just hand out a book and tell students: read this and be done in four weeks”. In her experience, the introduction must spark the students’ interests. She frequently reads the first chapter aloud for
the students and then discusses the context of the work in question. She also provides the
students with a list of key vocabulary occurring in the text. Similar examples were brought up
by T3, T4 and T5, who all stressed the importance of introducing the material to be read. T5
mentioned that she usually presents a theme from the literature which they discuss
beforehand, and sometimes they examine other sources such as Ted-talks which feature the
same topic before reading. These four teachers also stressed the importance of having smaller
assignments during the reading process, both to stimulate thoughts regarding the material and
to verify that the students comprehend it.

All of the interviewed teachers reported oral and written assignments as recurring when
working with literature. For both types of assignments, the teachers mentioned analysis as one
of the main objectives. T1, who at the time of the interview taught English 7, described the
analysis they do as focusing on literary terms, contexts and language. For instance, he said:
“We sometimes look at common features in a text, for example modernist and postmodernist
features. We use these very broad terms, which means we only briefly touch the surface.”
They also read a bit of Shakespeare and look “at dramaturgical features, characters and also
the Shakespearian language”. T3 described that he often introduces analytical questions in
English 6, whereas he is more concerned with comprehension-related questions and
assignments in English 5. In English 6 he also starts introducing more contextual aspects by
going over authors and their backgrounds as well as information about the specific types of
texts before students start reading. In English 7 the focus shifts to literary history and
theoretical discourse, which might include perspectives such as feminism and psychoanalysis.

T2 explained that most of the literary analyses in her courses are based on short stories and
that the analyses are often in the form of written assignments. As described in section 4.2, the
use of short stories enables her to include several texts, which means that students are able to
practice writing analytically in different contexts. Similarly, T5 often uses short stories for
analytical assignments, which are treated more objectively, and novels for more reflection-
oriented assignments, which are treated in a more subjective manner. When T5’s students are
expected to analyze, she often focuses on interpreting the texts by identifying and applying
literary terms. T4 mixes analytical questions with both comprehension- and reflection-
oriented questions. T6, who primarily incorporates literature in English 7, most often uses
short stories for literary analysis. This is done through conversation which departs from what
the student understood of the text, whereupon T6 guides the student toward analytical
concepts such as symbolism, setting and the underlying message. T7 explained that she
introduces analytical concepts in English 6, primarily in the form of literary terms such as character, plot and setting. In English 7 her students read short stories from different English-speaking countries combined with being given history lectures about those countries. The subsequent analyses of the short stories are then conducted “by identifying historical events, or traces of them, featured in the texts” and then “students do written comparisons of history and short story”.

Six out of the seven teachers mentioned different forms of reflective exercises and assignments as frequently utilized. T7 reported that in English 5 students engage in informal book talks after reading. These are done in a reflective manner and students discuss aspects of the text which they found interesting. T6 said that while the analyses are done orally, the written assignments are much more reflective, subjective and based on themes. He provided the following example: “I often pick out themes which I ask the students to reflect upon. For instance I might ask them to reflect upon friendship and death when writing reflectively about Of Mice and Men by Steinbeck.” T5 explained that she often chooses subjects which are represented in both novels and other resources. One example she gave was working with prejudices and stereotypes where they listened to Ted-talks and read short stories on the subject. When she works with novels she tries to incorporate discussions around themes of the novels, which connect to the students’ experiences and thoughts. T4 explained that in English 5 she incorporates novels which feature clearly defined themes. After reading the novel, students are divided into smaller groups and asked to record reflective book talks centered on the themes to practice formulating their own thoughts. T3 described that he often mixes analytical and reflective assignments and he stressed the importance of using literature which features themes that are relatable and interesting for the students. T2 described that she constructs assignments and exercises that enable students to connect the literature to their own lives and experiences.

One type of reflective assignment reported was similar in each of the six teachers’ descriptions, regardless if it was a written or oral assignment. The students are asked to identify themes from the read material in order to describe their own experiences of the theme and compare them with the text.

4.3.1 Discussion

The emphasis teachers put on the introductory phase of working with literature can be seen as an example of how the reader approach is manifested. The main goal when introducing texts
seems to be to enthuse the students and motivate them to read. The list of key vocabulary in the introductory phase serve as an example of how the reader and language approach can work in conjunction, one providing incentive and the other tools for reading. The introducing of author and historical background was also commonly reported and would constitute important elements of the context approach, which includes the following: looking extra carefully at authors and their background as well as cultural factors surrounding the text. Four of the teachers put emphasis on having smaller assignments in the middle of the reading process. This can be seen as an example following Divsar and Abdoressa’s (2009) recommendation of having an eclectic or multi-step approach when incorporating literature. By having exercises before, while and after reading, students are able to receive feedback and necessary context and/or information surrounding the read material.

In the descriptions of how the teachers include analytic assignments in their work with literature, the text approach as described by Bloemert et al. (2016) and the literary elements as presented by Barette et al. (2010), appeared as fairly central. A staple in the described analyses seemed to be to learn about literary terms such as theme, symbolism, setting etc., which are then identified in texts and used to interpret the material. Interestingly, these text approach types of assignments only featured in English 6 and 7 while the reflective exercises occurred in all courses.

The reflection-based assignments described by six teachers combines the text, reader and context approach. An example of this is when students identify and discuss themes which they then connect to themselves and their experiences.

It may be assumed that by having both spoken and written assignments the students’ language proficiency increases in some way, as is claimed by Sage (1987) concerning the linguistic elements of literature. Although, the specifics of these assignments were not relayed so to hypothesize in what ways they are beneficial is not possible.

4.4 Teachers’ perceived constraints when working with literature

When the teachers were asked about constraints connected to working with literature, six out of seven referred to uninterested and unmotivated students. T5 said that “students do not read novels, the majority is very unaccustomed to reading longer material. They do not seem to read voluntarily”, a sentiment echoed by T1 who mentioned that students nowadays are often unfamiliar with literature and that very few read outside of school. He perceived that
familiarity with and knowledge of literature had dropped over the years, and speculated that this might have to do with Swedish society undervaluing literature. T2, and T7 agreed that students’ motivation and level of interest had dropped over the preceding couple of years, but they had no theories as to why this might be. This notion was developed by T3 who said that “youths today do not want to read, they do not see it as productive. They seem to rather watch a movie or read the summaries on Spark Notes.”

Another constraint described was time. T3 explained that reading is very time-consuming for the students and sometimes they have a lot of other school-related things to do. T2 reported that the amount of work required to incorporate literature can sometimes be too much, especially considering that she does not want to use the same texts again and again. This means that in order to find new and interesting texts, she has to spend a lot of time reading and evaluating literature. That incorporation of literature takes up a lot of time was also mentioned by T3, T4, T5 and T7. However, they did not categorize it as a constraint, rather it was discussed as a natural byproduct of working with literature considering the time it takes to find, read and evaluate texts as well as to construct vocabulary lists and assignments related to the texts.

Two teachers, T2 and T5, mentioned that there is a lack of audio versions for students with dyslexia and other reading difficulties. Both teachers find that short stories are rarely available as audio versions, which presents a constraint.

4.4.1 Discussion

The teachers’ propensity to apply the reader approach may be connected to the perceived increase of uninterested and unmotivated students. If, as the results suggest, the biggest constraint when incorporating literature is students who do not want to read, a natural response might be to try to make literature more exciting and relatable to students. The research reviewed in section 2.3 did not bring up the importance of motivating students, nor does it mention any challenges related to motivating students. On the contrary, Yang (2001), for example, found that literature was more motivating in comparison to text books. The motivational aspects were also discussed in section 2.4 by Sage (1987) and Paran (2008) who attributed literature with being inherently interesting to people. This sentiment is clearly not in complete accordance with a much more complex reality, and possibly misguided, as evidenced by the interviewed teachers’ experiences.
Time as a constraint was not as significant as unmotivated students, if one is to judge by the fact that only two teachers brought up the former. Time constraints may, however, be a factor explaining the frequent use of short stories, as they take up less time for both students and teachers. The utility offered by short stories may be hampered by the lack of audio versions, which can be of use when teaching students with dyslexia.

5. Summary and conclusion

The aim of the present study was to investigate how seven English teachers in Swedish upper-secondary school approach literature, what their ideals when working with literature are, and what difficulties they encounter in this respect. The findings showed that when incorporating literature in upper-secondary English teaching, the teachers’ ideal practice was to expand students’ social and cultural awareness, which is concurrent with Lgy11 (Skolverket, 2011). Another important goal was to develop the students’ language skills. In addition, the teachers emphasized the importance of the students’ interests. This applied to both what specific literature they taught and how they taught it. The criteria teachers presented for what literature they include were that it needed to feature topics interesting to students, and that it should have the potential to fill a gap in the students’ English development. The teachers described their introduction of texts as crucial in cultivating an interest in reading. The assignments described by the teachers emphasized both literary analysis and subjective student reflection. The teachers generally asked students to relate literary themes to their own experiences. Unmotivated and uninterested students were reported as the biggest constraint when incorporating literature. This stands in contrast to a previous study by Yang (2001), which found literature to be motivating, as well as sentiments expressed by Sage (1987) and Paran (2008) who designate literature as inherently motivating for students.

This research suggests that literature inclusion is a complex matter, wherein the teacher needs to consider why, what and how literature should be included. The students’ English development needs, interests and lack of interests need to be taken into account when including literature. In light of the perceived dwindling motivation to read among students and the teachers’ apparent emphasis on the students’ interests when including literature, it might be increasingly important in general for teachers to connect to students’ needs and interests when including literature. This sentiment is important for both active teachers and teacher-students to keep in mind when incorporating literature in the classroom.
A natural continuation of this work would be to investigate students’ perceptions of and experiences with literature in English class. This is highly relevant as students’ attitudes toward literature are perceived by teachers as one of the main constraints. In addition, more research regarding the efficiency of literature teaching approaches is needed, as this is a fairly unexplored area. A suggestion is to conduct Action Research where teachers’ immediate concerns can be investigated.

References


Appendix 1

Interview questions:

Which courses in English do you teach?

For how long have you been teaching English?

In your teacher-training, did you work with literature in English? Did you have methodology courses?

When I am talking about literature I include not only short stories and novels but also poems and lyrics. Looking at these different types of literature, which type do you most frequently use?

Is it important to have a range of different text types? Why? Do you consider any specific text-type as unnecessary? Are any of the text-types of extra importance?

Generally speaking, which types of assignments do you usually use in connection with literature teaching? Are there differences in assignments between, for example, working with poems and working with novels?

Do you experience any kinds of obstacles in teaching literature in English?

Do students in one class often read the same texts or are there differences in reading material between students?

How do you approach the selection of what is to be read by students?

Do you have any specific work/works that you often return to? Why this/these one?

Are you satisfied with the access to literature at your school? Do you have access to a school library?

What do you consider to be important aspects when it comes to teaching literature? What do you consider to be the biggest advantage when it comes to learning of English?

What do you consider to be disadvantages in teaching literature in English class?

When it comes to choosing literature, do you experience that you have to prioritize between focusing on language learning versus cultural learning or textual learning? Do these different aspects of learning oppose each other or do you think that they work together?

Do you feel that you have enough time and resources to work with literature in English class?

Would you change anything about how you incorporate literature in the classroom?
Appendix 2

Email sent to teachers:

Hej XXXXXX,

Jag heter Simon Granath och är lärarstudent i ämnena svenska och engelska på Mälardalens högskola, med inriktning mot gymnasiet. Jag arbetar just nu med mitt examensarbete i engelska vilket har temat litteratur i engelskundervisningen. Under min VFU väcktes ett särskilt intresse för ämnet då jag upplevde den stora pedagogiska spännvidd litteratur kan ha. Av den anledningen är jag nu intresserad av att intervjuar dig som aktiv lärare om dina tankar och erfarenheter gällande litteraturens roll inom ämnet engelska.

Jag vill försöka ta reda på vad engelsklärare anser är viktigt eller oviktigt, möjligt eller omöjligt när det kommer till litteratur i de olika engelskkurserna i dagens gymnasieskola. I tidigare studier och i kurslitteratur finns en mängd olika perspektiv på litteraturundervisning representerade och det vore intressant och angeläget att få veta hur dessa olika perspektiv ter sig i praktiken för lärare.

Det vore därför en stor förmån att få intervjuar dig. Deltagandet är givetvis anonymt och i sammanställningen av resultatet kommer det inte ens att framgå vilken skola eller stad du jobbar i.

Vid intresse eller frågor vänligen hör av dig till via XXXXXXX@XXX.XXXX.XX

Du kan även nå min handledare, Thorsten Schröter, via XXXXXXX.XXXXX@XXXXX.XX

Stort tack på förhand!

Med vänliga hälsningar

Simon Granath