

Teaching Literature in the ESL Classroom

A Qualitative Study on Teachers' Views of Literature in an Upper Secondary School Environment in Southern Sweden.



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Term: Fall 2015

Course: ÄENC51 English IV

Individual Research Project (15 hp)

English Teacher Education

Campus Helsingborg

Abstract

This is a qualitative study conducted in Sweden to inform on views and approaches to literature teaching in the ESL classroom of teachers at upper secondary schools. The research questions are: What views may teachers have of the teaching of literature in the ESL classroom in upper secondary school in Sweden? How can the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school be interpreted and used when it comes to literature teaching in the ESL classroom? What relation can one detect between the teacher's own view on literature and their practice?

In order to answer these questions, interviews have been conducted with four teachers from two different schools in Southern Sweden (Lund and Kristianstad). The analysis of the interviews shows a connection between the teachers' own views on literature and their interpretation of the curriculum, which results in very different practices. Nevertheless, the role of literature in the ESL classroom can be ascribed to three main purposes: language improvement, knowledge and understanding of different cultures and personal growth.

The study deals with issues and topics that are grounded on the practice of English teaching, therefore I hope it will inspire to reflection fellow student teachers, serving upper secondary teachers and even teacher educators.

Keywords: teaching literature, ESL, teacher's view, curriculum, Sweden

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1 Introduction

My experience of studying literature in school has always been about knowing the literary periods, being able to name the most important authors that characterized those periods, having knowledge of the literary styles of the different authors and their works, being able to identify different kinds of styles and figures of speech, paraphrasing the oldest works, and lastly reading. Curiously though, we only read very few or very little of the works we had to have knowledge of, most often poetry, short stories and abstracts or summaries of novels. Reading novels for school occurred as a separate practice from the literature we did in class with the teacher, usually as homework during the holidays; if I actually enjoyed the novel, it was just a "bonus" and I did not expect to. Reading for pleasure was something I did in my spare time, when I could choose books that were appropriate for my age and my interests, but I was never allowed to read those books for school, and neither did I expect to: I knew the novels I read for school had to be representative of the literary world of my culture.

I noticed that the study of literature as I know it is not a common practice in Swedish upper secondary school, especially in the English classroom, where "doing literature" is usually reading and, sometimes, discussing a novel. As a future teacher of English I wanted to investigate more what it is meant with literature in the English classroom and how that is represented in the curriculum and by the teachers.

1.1 Research Questions

This study aims at answering three questions:

- What views may teachers have of the teaching of literature in the ESL classroom in upper secondary school in Sweden?
- How can the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school be interpreted and used regarding to issues such as materials, assessing and students' motivation when it

comes to literature teaching in the ESL classroom?

- What relation can one detect between the teacher's own view on literature and their practice?

Discussing these questions, I believe, could be of great interest to future teachers as me, but also to serving teachers and teacher educators, as this topic focuses on a fundamental aspect of the teaching of English, where the actual practice is in strict relation to the teacher's own values and conceptions and the interpretation of the curriculum.

1.2 Overview of the Study

This is a qualitative study based on interviews. In the *Background* section I will address issues and conceptions in the teaching of literature in the ESL/EFL classroom with the aid of current research and theories. In the *Method* section I will explain how the study has been conducted, successively in the section called *Analysis* I will present the results, processing the data from the interviews.

2 Background

There are not many studies conducted on teachers' views towards literature and their implications for practice. Most literature focuses on the reasons for literature studies in language learning and schooling in general, or on the analysis of different approaches in literature teaching. In the following subsections I will address the general views on literature teaching, the major approaches employed and the situation of this topic in Sweden.

2.1 The Reasons for Literature in Language Education

Three aspects recur very often in current research articles as the main reasons for teaching literature in the EFL classroom (see for example Tarakçioğlu, 2003; Yilmaz, 2012; Rahimi, 2014; Yimwailai, 2015): language improvement, focusing on the linguistic features and structures of a text, as a cultural model to discuss societal issues from a different culture's point of view, or as a way to achieve personal growth through reading. For what concerns language improvement, the students come across authentic material which may increase their proficiency in vocabulary, syntactics and linguistic uses of the target language (Tarakçioğlu, 2003, p. 217; Yilmaz, 2012, p. 87; Rahimi, 2014, p. 3; Yimwailai, 2015, p. 15). Secondly, the content of the literary readings may introduce the students to cultural features that may bring the students to reflection on diversities and/or similarities between different cultures and people and different points of view (Tarakçioğlu, 2003, p. 219; Sell, 2005, p. 90; Rahimi, 2014, pp. 6-7; Yimwailai, 2015, p. 15); this will benefit on their critical thinking skills and will broaden their horizons on various topics and issues (Rahimi, 2014 p. 7). Lastly, literature for personal growth implies that the reading experience will have positive consequences on the reader's ability to develop social skills, feelings and emotion, as well as raising language awareness (Tarakçioğlu, 2003, p. 220; Yilmaz, 2012, p. 87; Yimwalai, 2015, p. 15). The focus on the reader's own experiences and feelings is also at the base of the reader-response theory,

which presents literature as an object open for personal interpretation (Goodwyn, 2012, p. 213). The reader has the power to interpret the text through own emotions and feelings; moreover the reader takes on an active role, as opposed to passively absorb the facts about the text (Corcoran, 1991; de Beaugrande, 1992; Hirvela, 1996). The text is perceived as incomplete by itself and it becomes meaningful only with the reader's contribution (de Beaugrande, 1992; Hirvela, 1996). In education the reader-response theory and the personal growth model have many implications, as to motivate the students, engage them in open discussions, lead them to self reflection and critical thinking (Yilmaz, 2012, p. 87). Also, the personal growth model aims at developing an appreciation for literature that is achieved through gaining familiarity with the language and different styles of the language as well as developing a personal taste.

This way of perceiving literature as a means to achieve better language proficiency, knowledge of different cultures and personal growth puts literature under a different light as opposed to the view of literature as an end. The latter is being criticized in recent times, because the learner is mainly supposed to learn facts about canonical literature and distinguished authors, rather than engaging in the experience of reading and develop own interpretations and understanding of the texts (Tarakçioğlu, 2003, p. 219).

2.2 Approaches to Literature

There are of course different theories and methods for teaching literature that are based on different conceptions of literature, but three major theories can be found in the book *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* (Beach, Appelman, Hynds & Wilhelm, 2011, pp. 6-9): the transmission theories, the student-centered theory and the socio-cultural theory.

The transmission theory is based on the traditional conception of literature: the teacher presents the facts about the text studied and the students learn mechanically to

reproduce these facts. This theory is most effective for a test-driven educational practice, and therefore still in use, but it is highly criticized. Recent studies conducted in Asian countries show the disadvantages of an approach where the teaching of English literature merely consists in the teacher presenting, explaining, translating, analyzing, summarizing etc. the text while the students listen passively (Hwang & Embi, 2007; Yimwilai, 2015). The study conducted by Hwang and Embi in Malaysia (2007) clearly shows that the students are not motivated in their learning and development when their literary studies are limited to repeating what the teacher said about a text: in this way literature becomes a futile exercise with the only effect of discouraging students from reading. According to the student-centered theory, it is the students who have all the responsibility for their learning; the students can choose the material and the way to work with it that suits them best. The critique against this type of approach is that there is no social growth in this method and the learning is limited to the students' experiences. Finally, the socio-cultural theory lays on Vygotsky's vision of learning as a social practice. The students learn from each other and develop their knowledge and ways of thinking. In literary studies it can enhance their ability of using different critical lenses and be open to others' interpretation.

2.3 Literature in the Swedish Curriculum¹

In the Swedish curriculum for the upper secondary school, the syllabi for the subject English are not very specific about literature. The aim of the subject is mainly focused on the communicative aspect of the language, stressing the fact that English is used all over the world in politics, education and economics (Skolverket, 2011). The literature component is present in all three stages (English 5, English 6 and English 7), but it is not specific in terms of materials, methods and approaches to employ; here I present what it says specifically about

¹ The curriculum in question is the whole national steering document for the upper secondary school, whether the syllabus is a part of the curriculum that is subject specific. In this essay I often refer to the curriculum, which includes the syllabi for the subject English.

literature.

- English 5 – Content of communication: Content and form in different kinds of fiction.
- Reception: Literature and other fiction.
- English 6 – Content of communication: Themes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods.
- Reception: Contemporary and older literature, poetry, drama and songs.
- English 7 – Reception: Contemporary and older literature and other fiction in various genres such as drama.

Teachers can, therefore, interpret and develop these indications in different ways, connecting them with other components of the curriculum and/or to their own conception of literature, values and experiences, which will ultimately result in very different practices.

Furthermore the term literature is not present in the Knowledge Requirements section in any of the three stages, which can be interpreted as a sign that the Swedish curriculum supports the vision of literature as a means rather than an end. This, together with the vagueness of the whole syllabus on the topic literature, can be juxtaposed to the study conducted by Goodwyn (2012) on the curriculum for secondary school in the UK. He explains that although the teachers want to embrace and promote a reader-response approach to the teaching of literature, it is almost impossible to do so in practice, because of the strictness of the curriculum in this matter. Moreover, he argues that the status of literature in the curriculum is very high in the traditional vision of literature as knowledge about the canonical authors and their works; this leads to the teachers feeling overwhelmed by the number of works they have to teach and the exam-oriented practice, leaving almost no time for the students to actually engage in reading the whole texts and benefit from the experience.

3 Method

In order to answer my research questions I chose to conduct interviews with teachers of English for the upper secondary school. Four teachers from two different schools in southern Sweden (one in Lund and one in Kristianstad) volunteered to participate to the interviews after I contacted the schools. For privacy reasons the names of the schools and of the teachers will not be revealed; the teachers involved in the study will be referred to as A, B, C and D.

The four participants were not aware of the subject matter until after they accepted to participate to the study, so that the chance of having only participants with a more positive attitude to literature would be diminished. The interviews were conducted in English, so that the extracts used in the analysis are the actual words of the participants; the interviews were recorded and later transcribed in order to conduct a reliable analysis of the material (Seidman, 2006, p. 115).

3.1 The questions

For the interviews I created a set of questions inspired by previous research studies that involved surveys and interviews (Hwang & Embi, 2007; Goodwyn, 2012; Witte & Jansen, 2015) and issues discussed in the book about literature teaching: *Teaching literature to adolescents* (Beach, Appelman, Hynds & Wilhelm, 2011). The questions were mainly open questions, so that the participants were free to answer in the way they want; this was also done with the intent of not leading the participant to follow my own attitudes (Nunan, 1992, p. 145). The questions aim mostly to identify the teachers' own view of literature and their interpretation and use of the curriculum for the practice of the literature component.

- How would you define the term literature?

- Why do you think we have to teach literature in the ESL classroom? – Do you think the students are aware of that?
- Do you think your conception of literature is the same conveyed in the curriculum? – (If not) which one is?
- Do you try to tie up your choices with what is in the curriculum? – How important is the curriculum for your planning?
- Do you feel the curriculum allows you to teach literature in the way you think is the most appropriate?
- What would you say is the main effect of literature on the students' learning?
- How long have you been a teacher of English?
- Did your conception of literature change overtime since you started teaching/since your training? – (If yes) how/why?
- Would you say that your school supports a certain ideology/approach on how to work with literature? – Do you talk about literature in the meetings with your colleagues?
- How do you usually choose the material for your literature lessons? – Do you use the curriculum as a support?
- How do you usually assess your students' knowledge and achievements in literature? – Do you use the curriculum as a support?
- How much time, approximately, of your hours of English in the semester do you usually dedicate to literature? – Do you wish you had time for more?
- How do you motivate your students to read and engage in literature work?

4 Analysis

4.1 The Vision of Literature

As I stated before, literature can take three major roles in education: language improvement, cultural understanding and personal growth. From the results of my interviews these three aspects are present more or less in all four the participants' approaches, but with different degrees, where one aspect is perceived as more important than the others. In the following sections 4.1.1, 4.1.2 and 4.1.3 I will analyze to what degree each participant addressed these aspects.

4.1.1 Literature for language improvement. There is no doubt that reading in another language will have an impact on the learner's acquisition of the target language, because of the exposure to appropriate input (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 37). For participant D this is, then, the main reason for which we have to teach literature in the ESL classroom:

Except for being, you know, fun and interesting, I think (literature) is a wonderful tool for teenagers or all learners to pick up new words and phrases and to see idiomatic language; it's reading comprehension so it's not just for entertainment, but for learning.

She sees literature as a tool that she can use to reach the final goal of English teaching, which is language learning. Participant A gives a similar comment on this aspect:

(Literature) is gaining understanding, it's appreciating the art of literature, and also, I mean, what I haven't mentioned before – but should be as important – is the

language involvement, the language development in terms of understanding the abstractions in the literature, so language development also.

He agrees that the language development is an aspect of reading literature that should be as important as gaining understanding of the different cultures and appreciating the art of literature. Nevertheless, in this case the goal of reading literature is first of all being able to understand the text for its own value and not only to reach a higher language proficiency.

In the case of participant B, the language is seen more like a problem to overcome:

[...] to meet the language in a very natural setting, and of course that's a problem we have teaching in another country. [...] I ask them to enjoy reading, I think that's the most important thing. [...] I don't want them to stop too often, they don't need to know every word they read, they get the context, but stop now and then and when you see a word many times that you don't understand you should try to understand what it means. So it's the language part, but I think the most important thing is to enjoy stories, actually.

Participant B recognizes the benefits of reading because of language exposure, as long as the level of the language does not compromise the reader's enjoyment and appreciation of the text.

To sum up, the participants acknowledge the benefits of reading on the students' language proficiency; however for participant D, the language is the goal and the reading is the means to achieve this goal, while for A and B, the main objective is to be able to understand a text and enjoy the reading, for which a development of the language is necessary. Nevertheless the two are compatible, considering Krashen's theory of

comprehensible input, which claims that language acquisition is enabled through extensive exposure to input at an appropriate level (not too difficult and not too easy); however the language improvement can only occur if the affective filters of the learner are down, i.e. the learner is in a positive emotional state, for example when enjoying and finding purpose in the activity (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 37; Harmer, 2007, pp. 50-51).

4.1.2 Literature for knowledge of the world and other cultures. Through reading literature one has the opportunity to learn about other people's experiences and living conditions and in this way get an understanding of other cultures and other time periods (Tarakçioğlu, 2003, p. 219; Sell, 2005, p. 90; Rahimi, 2014, pp. 6-7; Yimwailai, 2015, p. 15). Participant A stresses this aspect as being the most important thing the reader can acquire from literature:

Literature is for me an experience of the world. [...] To learn about people around the world, so culturally and geographically and historically, looking into what has happened in the world. [...] Essentially two things: gaining understanding for other people and for different time periods and then learning to appreciate the art of literature.

The importance of gaining knowledge of the world is strictly connected to gaining understanding for other people and be open-minded about diversities and different cultures. Also, appreciating literature as a form of art can be understood as a cultural aspect.

A similar vision is shared by participant C:

Because if you don't know about English, about literature, you would not have windows open where you can see what has happened, what might happen and

could happen. [...] seeing from an historical perspective as well and defining why the book was written in the time that it was written and what purpose it could have had.

In this case, however, she focuses on the historical value of literature, where a novel could be used to better understand the time period it was written in. Nevertheless, knowing about history may help to have a better understanding of the present or even the future.

Also participant B addresses this aspect: "(Literature) gives you so much knowledge about different times when people lived, it gives you knowledge about culture, how people live". Participant B agrees, then, with the vision of literature as a way to gain knowledge about the world, history and different cultures.

A more practical perspective on this point is showed by participant D:

You can use the novel as a basis for further work, so we used this novel, *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, as a starting point for some studies on English speaking countries. [...] They are going to find an article that is related to the novel and also the article is going to be related to the English speaking world somehow, so that is going to be developed into a bigger project on English speaking countries. [...] That is how you have to think, that when you use a material like a novel, that you can use it for many purposes.

She points out that the content and themes of a novel can be a starting point for other work in English; without going into deep analysis of the literary work, simply use it for connecting it to other projects that are not literature, but have understanding cultural diversity as a goal.

In the case of literature for knowledge of other cultures, all participants agree with the fact that reading about certain cultures, times and people will enhance the students' knowledge about these topics. Also, as participant D observes, these kinds of topics need to be addressed because they are clearly stated in the curriculum, therefore literature can be a valuable starting point for further work. For example, from the syllabus for English 6, paragraph 5 (Skolverket, 2011) we can read: "Living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used."

It is important, though, that, given the status of Lingua Franca English has today, the cultures addressed be of different countries with different backgrounds, in order to raise awareness in the students about social issues such as racial, religious, cultural, sexual diversities (Sell, 2005, pp. 90-91; Rahimi, 2014, p. 9).

4.1.3 Literature for personal growth. Reading about certain themes, situations and characters can make one think about their own personal situation and come to a better understanding of oneself (Tarakçıoğlu, 2003, p. 220; Yilmaz, 2012, p. 87; Yimwalai, 2015, p. 15). This point is the one that has been acknowledged the least by the participants, nevertheless instances of this aspect can be found in some of the interviews.

Participant B's main reason for teaching literature is to enjoy reading:

[...] but I think the most important thing is to enjoy stories, actually, to see that that's really what life is about, we have all these stories and different ways and that is what life is.

In this case, to enjoy stories does not only mean to have fun reading, but also getting an understanding of life through deep involvement in the stories.

Participants C accounts for her intention of getting reactions from the students.

I think they will be shocked and/or touched depending on what kind of literature I choose. [...] It can be shocking them by reading *A Modest Proposal* or anything that would make them react, actually.

By giving them texts that are shocking or touching to read, she expects the students to react and in this way form an opinion on the themes touched, which can lead to personal and cognitive growth.

Participant A gives an example of how working in class can be illuminating: "[...] you see how they struggle and then they manage, or like when today someone saw something that I wanted them to see, and... Ah! It's lovely to see those things." Through his lessons he can make the students see things in the text that they would have probably ignored otherwise, which will make them develop their reading abilities and in this way get the most out of their reading. He also gives an example about themes that make people reflect:

[...] *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which I do with my English 5 students, they obviously see the link between reading this novel and the understanding of autism, for example, or people with different diagnoses.

In this case I want to draw a parallel between the personal growth aspect and the knowledge of the world and other cultures one. Reading a novel like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, that treats the topic of autism, the reader gets an understanding of other people (knowledge of the world) as well as developing as a more sensitive and compassionate person.

Literature for personal growth means, then, that the reader is emotionally involved in the reading because it may touch upon themes and topics that are relatable to one's own personal situation or to real life situations in general and learn from it (Rahimi, 2014, p. 9; Beach, Appelman, Hynds & Wilhelm, 2011, p. 46). Also, considering participant A's comment, there can be personal growth in the language sense, i.e. being able to understand abstract and difficult passages so that the whole text becomes meaningful; the text alone can be too cryptic for some students, but with the aid of the teacher the students can develop their reading skills and interpret the text so that they can appreciate it and enjoy it (Tarakçioğlu, 2003, p. 218; Bruns, 2011, p. 43; Rahimi, 2014, p. 3).

4.2 The Relation to the Curriculum

Following the curriculum is at the basis of being a teacher. As I mentioned before, the Swedish syllabus for the subject English is not extensive when it comes to literature, so in the following sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 I will analyze respectively how the participants feel towards the curriculum and how they have chosen to interpret it.

4.2.1 Teacher's vision of literature versus the curriculum. One of the questions I asked was "Do you think your conception of literature is the same conveyed in the curriculum?". All four the participants gave an affirmative reply to this question, despite the fact that, as stated above, they all have a different vision of literature, where they prioritize one aspect over the other. Another question I asked was "Do you feel the curriculum allows you to teach literature in the way you think is the most appropriate?". In this case, however, the responses were different. Participant C points out that, since the curriculum is not specific, the teacher has the liberty to interpret it as he or she wishes: "The curriculum is very vague, so it's a question of my interpretation". In other words, the vagueness of the curriculum allows the teacher to treat the literature component freely. Participant B agrees with C: "I don't think

the curriculum is any hindrance to what you like to do on the lessons. It gives you the base of what you should bring in, it's good to have it that way." In this case, stating that the curriculum is not a hindrance, he uses the curriculum more as a framework for what he wants to teach rather than a starting point. B already knows what and how he wants to teach for the literature component, and this kind of curriculum allows him to do that.

Participant A and D are more critical towards the curriculum. A states:

I think that in the current curriculum there is actually nothing explicit, apart from the content, but not in the requirements, there is nothing explicit about reading literature, which it used to be. [...] There are aspects of literature that could be more explicitly expressed in the curriculum, not maybe to me where I work, but there are other teachers that need it.

He points out the lack of indications in the requirements section of the curriculum, which he sees not as giving free hands to the teacher, but as a problem for assessment and for teachers who could need more guidance. Also Participant D notices that literature does not appear in the requirements section:

Had I had more time I think I would have been able to go more in depth, but on the other hand you have the course requirements that don't really say that you have to really go that much into depth.

She expresses the wish of going in depth with literature, but she chooses to not do that because of the time restrictions and because it is not a requirement stated in the curriculum.

She also adds:

And also I do think it's a pity that the new curriculum doesn't pay that much attention to the history of literature, I would have liked to speak more about English speaking authors. We don't have that much time so I have to focus on what's actually on the curriculum.

In this case we can see how she uses the curriculum as a starting point for planning her lessons, as opposed to B who has already an idea of what he wants to do and only consults the curriculum to see that there is no hindrance to that.

4.2.2 Interpreting the curriculum. From the previous section we could see how the curriculum is vague about literature and that literature does not come in the requirements section. The curriculum must then be interpreted by the teacher in order to plan and teach the literature component.

For participant B, interpreting the curriculum is finding the things you like in it: "As a teacher you are good at some things and not so good at other things, so you sort of adapt yourself to what you find in the curriculum." Also participant C shares a similar point of view: "If (the curriculum) says that you should study and discuss older literature, yes I think that my definition would be fairly accurate." In her case, she has an historical conception of literature, so to her it is important to study the history of literature and treat novels as representatives of their time. The syllabus for step 6 does contain in the content section "authors and literary periods" and "Contemporary and older literature", which to her means teaching the history of literature and the classics. Participant A feels less constricted to the curriculum:

After having been teaching for some years you learn to set up your teaching and your planning without having the actual curriculum next to you, you know what you need to do, but it's always a part of it, of course.

Participant D plans with assessment in mind, because she feels the curriculum is very demanding when it comes to assessment, which results, as we saw before, in leaving out some parts of literature that are not in the requirement section:

(The curriculum) is always at the back of my head when I plan my courses and my lessons, with every task I plan I always make sure that it's part of the curriculum and with this new curriculum, you have to assess the students quite a few times; I think it's extra important to make sure that everything you give to the students to do, everything that I collect and assess, it has to be purposeful, it has to answer to some parts of the curriculum.

To summarize the whole section about the curriculum, participants A, B and C do not feel limited or oppressed by the curriculum in their teaching and their choices can be justified by their personal interpretation of the document. The nature of the Swedish curriculum allows this kind of approach as opposed to the curricula of other countries that are more detailed and specific. For example, Goodwyn (2012) explains how the teachers in the UK feel oppressed by the curriculum, especially for the literature part, because of the numbers of works and authors they are expected to teach, as well as the exam-oriented school system. The frustration of the teachers often results in rushed lessons and demotivation among the students, preventing, ultimately, their learning and their love for reading. On the other hand, participant A still feels the need for more guidance and clarity for the literature component in

the curriculum, so that less experienced teachers may use it as a support for planning their lessons. Lastly, Participant D feels in a way constricted by the curriculum for the assessing part, which, by leaving out the literature, forces her to cut down her teaching and assessment of literature.

4.3 Choosing the Material

Choosing the material to work with is at the base of planning; when it comes to literature, one of the major aspects is definitely choosing what texts to give the students to read. The curriculum does not give any clues on what literary works the teacher should use, but in this case all four participants think alike.

First of all, the vagueness of the curriculum allows the teacher to choose texts following their own preferences. A: "I'm being rather selfish. I take what I like."; B: "I adapt to literature that I know, that I think I can talk about in a personal way."; D: "I prefer it if I like the novel that I'm giving to my students." Nevertheless, they all agree on another aspect as well: trying to adapt to the students, because in the end they are the ones who have to read. A: "If I have the time I combine my preference with a specific group's, what I expect them to prefer."; C: "it's actually about finding novels that might suit the student that is going to read."; D: "I try to think about what might interest the students." On this aspect, participant B often lets his students choose novels on their own:

The students also read books that they choose on their own, that's to get them to find joy in reading. [...] That's both good and bad maybe, but it's very good in a way, because some students are very slow readers and they can't choose a thick book because that will destroy their life.

By choosing books on their own, the students can feel more motivated and in this way really have an opportunity to enjoy their reading. On the other hand, as B acknowledges, it can also have disadvantages in some practical situations; for example, it can be more difficult to work with the novels in class and properly assess the students, as participant C explains here: "When they choose completely freely I think that it's more difficult for me to actually check that they have read it. Even if I read them, they would need thirty different exams."

Also, the freedom both of the teacher and of the students is actually often limited to what material is available in the school and/or at the library. Participant D comments on this fact:

I have to choose from what we have got here at the English department. [...] We have quite a few novels here as classroom sets so that the entire class can read the same, [...] but I've had student teachers that now have found employment in other schools and some are really upset: "They don't have that many novels here!"

Even though the four participants seem to be more or less on the same page when it comes to choosing the materials for their literature lessons, the outcomes are obviously going to be very different, because they are based on the teachers' personal preferences, the students' or the class' interests and the grade of availability in the school.

The four participants agree on the fact that the curriculum cannot be used for choosing the literary works, so they usually choose following their taste and the students' needs and interests. This kind of approach is supported by the fact that if the teacher has knowledge and a positive attitude towards the topic or literary work, the teaching will be more enriching and motivating for the students (Gibson, 1998, p. 154). Also, taking in consideration the students is even more important, because they are those who will have to

read the texts; the students have to be viewed as individuals with different, personal experiences, backgrounds, abilities and preferences, therefore, being able to conciliate those aspects with teaching should be in the interests of the teacher (Yilmaz, 2012, p. 87; Rahimi, 2014, p. 4; Witte & Jansen, 2015, p. 576).

4.4 Assessment

When it comes to assessing the students' achievements in literature, teachers often have difficulties in determining what to actually assess. This has to be connected to the goal(s) the teacher has set for the students' learning, which ultimately is a concretization of the teacher's own vision of literature (Beach, Appelman, Hynds & Wilhelm, 2011, pp. 224-225). As it has been stated before, the Swedish curriculum does not present any requirements that are clearly connected to literature (the word literature and/or derivatives are not present in the requirement section of the syllabus). This can mean that the teachers do not only need to interpret, but actually determine themselves if and what to assess, which will obviously lead to very different practices.

Participant A, B and C consider writing tasks as a way for assessing: A: "Sometimes it's through written tasks, such as reviews on literary analysis. [...] I've had anything when it comes to written assignments."; B: "When they read books on their own they write reviews, and then I can see about their knowledge about literature, because they will compare to other books in their reviews."; C: "When talking about novels it could be an analysis, it could be a book report, a book review." So, different writing assignments for different purposes, where the students can demonstrate that they have read the novel, can show creativity, can express opinions and connect to previous experiences. Also oral tasks can be an option, such as presentation, oral examinations, and group discussion, according to A, C and D.

Only C accounts for testing the students' knowledge about facts in literature:

When talking about the classics you can actually have an examination where you just check that they have learned, that's very easy. [...] about general knowledge, I mean, they need to know who Chaucer was, [...] they need to know a bit about Shakespeare, not too much, just basic knowledge.

Following her vision of literature as a product of history, she thinks it is important to have knowledge about the time and the authors, in order to better understand the text. Participant B, on the other hand has different priorities, as we could see in section 4.1.3, so he consciously chooses to leave out testing literature history: "I don't really stress that they should know by heart everything in literature history. [...] I don't make any tests, I used to do that, but not anymore, I think it's not important, I want them to enjoy." Nevertheless, assessing in the ESL classroom also implies assessing the language, which is participant D' main focus: "In English I feel it's always the language that is my main topic for assessment, but I mean I can also assess their understanding of the novel, so that they have understood the content." Also, when talking about group discussions about a novel, she specified that, first of all, she wants to assess the students' speaking proficiency: "My goal was to let each student speak for quite a long time, more than they can speak in the classroom anyway, and so I wanted to assess their sort of spontaneous talk." Her vision of literature implies the advantages of it in language acquisition, as we could see in section 4.1.1., therefore when assessing literature, the language still gets the main focus. Participant C comments on this aspect, saying that one can combine assessment for knowledge in literature with assessment for language development:

Speaking is one thing we assess, writing, so you could actually combine, you are not really grading on just one part, so it's a combination of writing, reading, not listening when it's about literature that much, but the other parts.

When assessing, it is clear that the teachers' own view of literature is reflected in the way they assess the students. Participant A wants them to be creative and show their interpretation of the text through different kinds of written tasks, according to his view of appreciation for literature and understanding of other cultures; also B assesses the students through writing tasks, but he also stresses the fact that he wants the students to enjoy reading, so assessing is not really important; C is the only one who carries out tests on general knowledge about literature, because she wants to make sure the students have gained the knowledge on the historical facts necessary to have a more complete understanding of the work studied; D sees literature as a means to gain better language proficiency, so the assessment relies mainly on the language component. It is interesting that, even though the curriculum does not require the assessment for literature, teachers still may feel the need to do it, often combining it with other components that need to be assessed, such as the language proficiency.

As mentioned before, one reason for the lack of Knowledge Requirements specific for literature, could be the view of literature as means to learn other things, rather than an end. Also, the Swedish curriculum is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which aims at achieving all-round communicative competence in the target language (Skolverket, 2011). For this reason the final goal of the English subject can be ultimately seen as communicative language proficiency, where a topic like literature can be used to achieve this goal.

4.5 Literature and Students

The students are in the end those who have to read the texts and engage in literature work; it is, then, necessary for the teacher to understand who the students are as individuals in order to adapt the content of the lessons, themes and topics to their needs and interests (Yilmaz, 2012, p. 87; Rahimi, 2014, p. 4; Witte & Jansen, 2015, p. 576).

When it comes to reading, assuming that adolescents would hate reading literature is a very loose generalization. The developing of the young adult genre has had positive reception by young readers (Beach, Appelman, Hynds & Wilhelm, 2011, p. 78), who usually enjoy reading, as the four participants confirmed. Nevertheless, it is still true that some students are not used to reading and are less motivated, therefore it is important for the teacher to point out the benefits of reading, as participant C observes: "I do not think that students read as much as they could or should, unfortunately. Some are readers, some are not, and we need to point out the importance of reading." In some cases perceiving the students as individuals means that the teacher has to set different goals achievable for each student in base of their abilities. For example, participant B explains that the most important thing is to make each student read and it does not matter what they read, if this will help them to reach their goal:

Many students, they aren't really good readers so you can't expect them to read too difficult things and too much text. You have to individualize a lot. [...] They come to the high school and they say "I've never read a book". I think this is terrible and I try to get them to read at least a little book, a thin one, to start with, to get them to enjoy and some people say: "oh this is the best book I've ever read, I don't like reading books, but this one was good", and then I feel "That's great".

Also participant C shows a similar view on this issue: "Some are readers and you could give them some more advanced books and those who are not readers I'm happy every time they read." Participant D also sees the advantages of individualization, but it becomes an issue if this crashes with the expectations and the requirements of the course:

You have to find a balance between requirements, what you can expect from a sixteen or seventeen-year old, and I think one these expectations is to read a novel, but you need to find that balance with who that individual is. And often you do show flexibility, but also many times you demand, you require things from them.

Nevertheless, in the ESL classroom there is also the language aspect to consider. The language should be at the right level for the students, but also reading a novel itself is a way of developing the language, as participant D explains:

Many students do actually enjoy reading novels, but I've been to other schools where it's been more difficult to persuade students that reading a novel will actually improve your English. But most students here I think they, perhaps they don't enjoy reading novels all the time, but they can see the advantages, they can see that they learn.

For her, reading a novel in the target language has benefits that are apparent to most students, who will, therefore, be more motivated to read. Setting a clear goal, like for example language proficiency, is one of the major aspects, when it comes to motivation; also a short-term goal

can be employed to increase motivation (Harmer, 2007, pp. 101-102), as, for example completing a task:

Me: "How do you motivate your students? "

A: "With the tasks we do. Yeah, different types of tasks. "

One should not only adapt to the students' needs and level, but also to their interests, which will contribute to increase their motivation, because they will enjoy what they do, as B suggests: "I try to get them to enjoy reading and to see that even old texts can be quite joyful. [...] It's interesting and it's also fun to read." Nevertheless, adapting to one's interests does not only mean fun, but it can also result in meaningfulness, as participant D explains:

I taught at the History Program (HIP) some years ago and we all read a novel set in the 17th century in America with the witch trials, and I know that since they are HIP students they are interested in history and then I picked a novel with a historical topic.

In this case adapting to the students does not mean to individualize, but to find a common interest that is also meaningful to the students.

Motivating the students to read is a key aspect for good teaching, which can be achieved through setting clear goals – for instance the language development, as for participant D, or through achievement, like being able to complete a task, as for participant A. Also, enjoying what one is doing is at the base for motivation, which in this case could mean to be able to choose a text that matches one's interests (Harmer, 2007, pp. 100-103; Yilmaz, 2012, p. 87); this will help the learner to lower down the affective filters described in Krashen's theory and in this way enable language acquisition (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p.

37; Harmer, 2007, pp. 50-51). Moreover, the language input should be appropriate for the level of the reader, so that the reader can have access to the meaning and purpose of the whole text, with room of improvement for their language proficiency (Tarakçioğlu, 2003, p. 214; Rahimi, 2014, p. 3). Finally, the full understanding of what one is doing and why is also a very important aspect; many times students are not fully aware of the importance of reading literature, which to them might only mean to pass the class, therefore it is crucial that the teacher acknowledge and clarify this aspect in order for the students to have a more positive attitude towards their reading and get the most out of it (Burns, 2011, p. 3).

5 Conclusion

The data in the analysis show that, even though the four participants have different views on literature, they all recognize three main reasons for teaching it in the English classroom: to improve the language, to gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures and to grow as a person. Moreover, the curriculum can be interpreted in different ways that support these visions, although the grades requirements do not include knowledge in literature, which for some teachers may result in prioritizing other aspects of the language over literature, as participant D explained. For the same reason, assessing literature may be of lesser interest for some teachers, who use the content of literature as a means to assess the students' language proficiency in writing and/or speaking; only one teacher in this study claimed to assess the students' knowledge in history of literature, such as recognizing literary periods and certain canonical authors. The curriculum is not being used for choosing the materials, i.e. the literary texts, which all participants claimed to choose on the basis of their own preferences and/or the students'. Finally, the students' own interests and motivation seem to be key factors for successful literature lessons, as the participants confirm claiming to adapt to the students' needs and interests.

This study has some limitations. The sample used in the study, being composed of only four participants, is not representative of a population². However, the results obtained are still relevant and worth analyzing because they represent a reality in the Swedish upper secondary school context. Additionally, I was not able to find studies conducted in Sweden on this topic, therefore comparisons with practices in other countries and their steering documents are made, but one has to consider the different contexts and implications of the teaching of literature in different countries and at different levels.

² An ideal number representative of a population does not really exist, however the literature suggests at least 25 participants for interviews (Seidman, 2006, p. 55).

This study focused mainly on the teachers' points of view and their use and interpretation of the curriculum for the teaching of literature in the subject English. For further research it would be beneficial to extend the study to a national level, in order to see how teachers, but also students, feel about literature and the curriculum in this matter. Also, in order to inform best practice, ethnographic research could be carried out in classrooms and in this way analyze different uses, methods and strategies in literature teaching in a Swedish context. Finally, it would be very interesting to investigate the implications and the outcomes of such different practices in literature teaching on the students' preparation, especially considering the contradiction of a vague curriculum that allows very different practices versus the equal education that we, as teachers, should be able to provide for our students.

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