

Critical Theory and Critical Literacy in the Classroom

*A study of how critical theory and critical literacy is used in a Swedish upper
secondary school*



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Term: Fall 2018

Course: ÄENC51 English IV

Individual Research Project (15 hp)

English Teacher Education

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Abstract

In this study, I have researched how a teacher at an upper secondary school in Sweden teaches critical theory to her students. The questions that were the base for this study included: how the teacher taught critical theory to her students and which theories they use, as well as how they use it and if the teacher includes critical theory when she plans her lessons. There are a lot of previous research on the area regarding critical theory and critical literacy in second language learning and using the same methods with children and adolescents, one of the examples is Chun (2009) *Critical literacies and graphic novels for English-language learners: teaching Maus*, who looks into the possibility to use graphic novels when teaching critical theory, instead of, longer literary texts. Even though this kind of research is common, the use of critical theory and critical literacy in Swedish schools are not very prominent. To answer these questions, I conducted a case study that included classroom observations, a questionnaire, and an interview. From the different research methods and searches for previous research, I have concluded that critical literacy and critical theory has an important role in the Swedish schools, however, the teachers do not necessarily call the classroom work done with different critical methods critical theory. This means that the students might not be aware of using critical theory, or the specific theories, but most of them can recognize that they have used it in one way or another when provided with explanations of different theories.

Keywords: Second language teaching, critical literacy, Swedish upper secondary school, literature, English as a second language

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Introduction

The phenomenon of critical theory in second language education is well researched; however, the use of it in Swedish upper secondary schools is an angle that barely has any research published. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to help fill this gap through researching how a teacher of English at an upper secondary school in Sweden uses critical theory in her lessons, starting at the planning of lessons, to the actual classroom work, and lastly her thoughts afterwards. This will be done through a combination of one interview, multiple classroom observations, and questionnaires distributed to students.

In the introduction to *Critical Theory Today – A User-friendly Guide*, Tyson (2015) writes about how critical theory can be used to understand everything around us. Mostly, she discusses critical theory in regard to literary texts, but she also implies that critical theory can be applied to everything produced by humans, such as: movies, art, and science, which falls outside the traditional view of literature. She writes:

... theory can help us learn to see our world in valuable new ways, that can influence how we educate our children, both as parents and teachers; how we view television, from the nightly news to situation comedies; how we behave as voters and consumers; how we react to others with whom we do not agree on social, religious, and political issues; and how we recognise and deal with our own motives, fears, and desires. (p.2) (Tyson, 2015, p. 1-6).

This quote shows that critical theory has an important role in today's society since it helps us interpret literary texts as well as other types of media and conversations. Because of this, it is important for teachers to help their students develop the ability to think critically and analyse texts as well as their surroundings since this will help them understand how two persons who

read the same text, watch the same movie, or analyse a picture might arrive at different conclusions.

This case study is focused on a teacher called Emma¹. Emma is working at a small school in the south of Sweden, in order to understand her views and work with critical theory and critical literacy a combination of classroom observations, questionnaire, and an interview with Emma will be used to answer the following questions:

- Does the teacher work with critical theory and critical literacy in connection to literature?
- If critical theory or critical literacy is used, how do they use it?
- Which theories do they work with during the lessons?
- Are the students aware of the concept that is critical theory?
- Which lenses do the students believe that they might be using?
- Does the teacher include critical literacy when she plans her literature lessons?

This essay will mainly deal with the concepts of critical theory and critical literacy; Willinsky (2008) describes the difference between the two by stating that critical theory is the theoretical framework of text analysis, and critical literacy builds upon those theories, but, he also writes that critical literacy is the thing we use whilst teaching since it is the process of working with different theories (Willinsky, 2008, p. 3). Thompson (2017) defines critical theory as methods used to understand and relate to society, he also writes that from the beginning critical theory was used to find relations between thoughts and actions but this has evolved over the years and that ideas that criticise parts of society have become a part of what is known as critical theory (Thompson, 2017, p.1-3). Willinsky (2008) agrees with Thompson (2017) that the theoretical roots of critical literacy have disappeared; however, he goes one step further than

¹ The name of the teacher has been switched out for a pseudonym in order to ensure her anonymity.

Thompson and says that it has become a natural part of school, and the International Reading Associations (IRA) has recommended the usage of critical literacy in the classroom to engage students in reading. Willinsky (2008) continues by stating that critical theory and education can be combined to create critical literacy (Willinsky, 2008, p.3-8). Critical theory is a central part in the Swedish syllabus for English since one of the criteria for passing English 5, the first English course at upper secondary school includes different ways of reading and analysing a text (Skolverket, 2011b).

This essay starts with a recount of earlier research on the area of critical theory and critical literacy in second language education and with younger learners. Thereafter, the two concepts of critical theory and critical literacy will be thoroughly presented. Following the theory section comes explanations of the different research methods used, a short introduction to what case studies are is followed by, descriptions of the classroom observation, questionnaire, and ending with the interview. After that, the combined result and analysis section is presented which starts with the classroom work mostly based on the observations, continuing with student's awareness of critical theory based on the answers from the questionnaires, and lastly, the teacher's thoughts on critical literacy based on the interview will be presented and analysed. The conclusion is then finished with the connection to professional practise and suggestions for future research on the subject.

Background:

As stated in the introduction, there is a lack of earlier research in regard to critical theory and critical literacy in Swedish upper secondary schools, therefore, the research presented here is in regard to critical theory and critical literacy in second language education, or the use of critical theory with adolescent or younger learners. Besides these two subjects, research about how critical theory or critical literacy is used in Swedish education is also included. The lack

of research on critical theory and critical literacy in Sweden is something this essay aims to help decrease.

As stated previously, the research used for this essay has focused on different groups of learners even if their main focus is critical theory. May (1995) focuses her book around children's literature to highlight the importance of using critical theory from an early age, with a special focus on students and teachers in schools. Rex (1968) focuses on the main areas of critical theory, where it comes from, and how it could and should be used in education. Bacon (2017) creates a framework to analyse literature critically in an English language teaching setting, especially with students learning English as a foreign language, since his experiences are that teaching critical theory in these groups are often avoided due to beliefs of it being too hard. His essay focuses on a big variety of ages and language levels of the learners in order to include the pedagogical differences that different aged learners create. Chun (2009) collaborated with a second study, where his theories regarding teaching critical literacy through comic books were tested. The collaborated study is conducted in an English as a second language learning classroom at a secondary school.

Earlier research on the area shows contradicting views on critical theory in second language learning. In *Children's Literature and Critical Theory*, May (1995) writes that literary criticism is important whilst working with children since it shapes them into critical readers from the beginning. She thinks that one of the most important things in regard to critical theory is that it shows students that even if they read the same material at the same time, they might interpret it differently depending on their personal experiences and standpoints (May, 1995, p. vii-ix, 7). Rex (1968) and Bacon (2017) agrees with May (1995) and her statement on the importance of critical theory whilst reading since every interpretation is linked to personal ideologies (Bacon, 2017, p. 425; Rex, 1968, p.91).

May (1995) also writes about the important role that adults have when influencing younger readers. The first influence she mentions that adults have on children is the way they encourage and motivates them to read. The second influence comes from teachers, and the education the children receive since they learn how to find main characters or themes in the way their teachers prefer (May, 1995, p.14-16). Bacon (2017) concurs with the statement of teachers' importance and adds that since critical literacy is not mandated the choices a teacher makes are crucial (Bacon, 2017, p.432). One-way May (1995) suggests countering the problem of students pleasing their teachers through doing the work in their preferred way is to use reader response theory, which is a critical theory in itself, where the students read and gives their opinion on the text instead of answering to questions created by the teacher (May, 1995, p.14-16). Chun (2009) also agrees with Bacon (2017) and May (1995) that teachers have an important role in their student's critical analysis but gives suggestions of questions the teacher could ask to help develop this ability which is a contradiction to May (1995), and her wish to avoid students pleasing their teacher through the usage of reader response theory (Chun, 2009, p.147).

Bacon (2017) carries on the arguments that are in favour of critical theory for multilingual learners through writing about how critical literacy often is avoided for these learners due to the fear of it requiring skills they have not learned yet. However, he follows this up by writing that the dynamics necessary for critical literacy are already a large part of English learning and, therefore, there should not be a problem to learn about critical theory from the beginning (Bacon, 2017, p.425). Chun (2009) agrees with Bacon (2017) and thinks that critical literacy and literature should go hand in hand since they are already closely related to each other especially in the real world. To avoid the risk of students not understanding the text and thereby having difficulties to analyse it Chun (2009) suggests using graphic novels, instead of, full-text novels, and gives a number of examples of graphic novels that could be used with students with lower proficiency as well as higher proficiency (Chun, 2009, p.146, 152). The use of graphic

novels shows that critical theory is something one can apply to any text not only strictly classic literary texts such as novels or novellas.

Even though Bacon (2017) claims that critical literacy should be a part of education from the beginning, he also mentions how researchers come to different conclusions regarding critical literacy and English as a second language teaching; the studies that are against using critical literacy in education imply that we should make the language learning a priority before starting with critical theory. The studies that are positive to using critical literacy thinks that it should be a natural part of language learning, instead of, a separate event (Bacon, 2017, p. 436-437).

The curriculum for upper secondary school in Sweden states that the school has to be open and encourage different ideas and expressions to help form the student's personal views. Continuing, it also states that the teaching has to be objective and provide the students with different approaches to said ideas (Skolverket, 2013, p.4). This is directly connectable to critical theory, since using different perspectives is the foundation on which it stands. Further on Skolverket (2013), writes that "Students should develop their ability to think critically, examine facts and relationships, and appreciate the consequences of different alternatives." (p.5) which further asserts the importance of critical theory. They continue this through discussing the overall goals and guidelines of knowledge the students should have achieved when they graduate. Amongst these the ability to gain information from different types of culture, for example, fiction and non-fiction, and to critically examine statements are listed (Skolverket, 2013, p.5,8).

Theory:

In this section, I will explain the two theories that created the foundation for this essay, critical theory and critical literacy. The two concepts might appear as synonyms from the beginning but through this section, I will point to the differences between the two.

Critical Theory

In the introduction to *Critical Theory Today: a user-friendly guide* Tyson (2015) writes that critical theory is the different lenses we can use whilst analysing texts (Tyson, 2015, p.2-3). Thompson (2017) continues on this track through writing that critical theory is more than only a tool for judging something, it can also be used as a way to relate to things we happen upon in everyday life. The philosopher Max Horkheimer was head of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt between 1930 and 1958 when he expressed that critical theory should be the counterpart to traditional theory and seek explanations and agents responsible for an object's transformation (Thompson, 2017, p.1-2, 6). Wilkins (2007) explains how critical theory is not a traditional theory through stating:

That is, it has not set out to explain how it is we know the world and should act within that knowledge, at least not apart from its sense that a critical engagement with what passes for common sense is where it stands on its surest philosophical ground. There is no presumption within Critical Theory that the goal is to identify any sort of real or ideal world that operates outside of this dialectic engagement with negative aspects of the administered life, the pseudo-reality and activity. (p.10)

This indicates that traditional theories seek explanations of the real world and its operations in a way that critical theory does not because it does not assume that the ideal world can be found (Wilkins, 2007, p.10).

There are multiple different critical theories to choose from for example: psychoanalytical criticism, new historical and cultural criticism (Tyson, 2014, p.11, 267; Rex, 1968, p.92-95). These two theories are the ones that will be used in this essay even if there are many more available.

Critical Literacy

Willinsky (2008) writes that “Among the approaches to teaching reading and writing, critical literacy offers connections to the larger world of ideas that are among the most impressive and challenging of any program that makes a claim on the school day” (p.3). He continues through writing that the educational influence of critical theory mainly comes from work in regard to critical literacy (Willinsky, 1998, p.3). This implies that critical theory and critical literacy are strongly connected and that critical literacy is heavily dependent on the different critical theories since they create the foundation critical literacy stands upon. Continuing, Willinsky (2008) writes that critical theory is a theoretical framework used while analysing texts, and critical literacy is what is used when teaching. (Willinsky, 2008, p.3) This implies that critical literacy is the teaching method that utilizes different critical theories.

Willinsky (2008) includes advice from The IRA about using critical literacy to encourage their students to become active as well as critical readers. The IRA also offers teachers a way to determine the writer’s point of view to practice critical literacy (Willinsky, 2008, p.6) In the core content for English 5, there is a direct connection between upper secondary school education in Sweden and critical literacy since one of the goals for reception is “Strategies for listening and reading in different ways and for different purposes.” When reading the knowledge requirements for the different courses it becomes clear that for a student to be able to achieve the highest grade (A) in any of the courses they have to be able to critically analyse a text and be able to use critical perspectives in their own productions (Skolverket, 2011b).

Shor (1999) writes “We can redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose, through alternative rhetoric and dissident projects. This is where critical literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane.” (p.2) (Shor, 1999, p.2). This quote by Shore (1999) follows a passage where he talks about how differences in gender, ethnicity, and social status influences the way people address each other. In other words, how rhetorical devices can change depending on the relationship between the people speaking. The second part of the quote could be seen as one way to encourage our students to become critical readers as Willinsky (2008) brought up in his research on the area (Willinsky, 2008, p.6). Shor (1999) continues by writing about how critical literacy challenges the norms and thereby creates new ways to develop both the individuals and the society at large (Shor, 1999, p. 2).

Further on in his text, Shor (1999) makes a distinction between literacy and critical literacy, where he uses a quote from Anderson and Irvine (1993):

From this perspective, literacy is understood as social action through language use that develops us as agents inside a larger culture, while critical literacy is understood as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (as cited in Shor, 1999, p.2).

This quote indicates that literacy is the act of reading, and thereby consume the text to gain something from the words you read, either pleasure or information, while critical literacy involves the act of questioning and analysing the content and motives with the help of multiple critical theories. This means that you move past the written words and read between the lines to understand more of the context.

Brack (1998) says that “We respond individually to a text bringing past images we remember. If those images are commonly available in the culture, we bring the images of our

culture” (p.51). This summarizes the main arguments she uses in her text, that everything we read is strongly connected to us and our experiences. Brack (1998) uses fairy tales as a way to teach her students that the meaning of a text or image is not always inserted by the writer or illustrator, but that the readers give the story a meaning depending on their backgrounds (Brack, 1998, p. 45, 51).

Methodology:

This section starts with a description of a case study which is the base of this research, then it continues with how I have conducted the classroom observations, questionnaires, and the interview.

Case Study

Nunan (2013) writes that case studies are a mix of different research methods, he also says that a case study can be hard to define since it could be a study following a single teacher, a single classroom, or even a school district, however, it should be within “a ‘bounded system’ or ‘single instance’” (p.76) (Nunan, 2013, p.74-76).

This study qualified as a case study since it followed a single teacher during a limited time period. The research material was gathered through a number of methods, both qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative parts being the observations and the interview, and the quantitative element was the questionnaire where the number of student answers was analysed to draw conclusions about which theories they use, and if they knew about the concept of critical theory.

Classroom Observation

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) write that an observation is “...‘research characterised by a prolonged period of intense social interaction between the researcher and the subjects, in the milieu of the latter, during which time data, in the form of field notes, are unobtrusively and

systematically collected'..." (p.116) They mention that classroom observations gives the possibility to understand a situation more thoroughly through experiencing the object and not only ask theoretical questions. They also say that observations minimize the risk of participants censoring their answers due to embarrassment or removing parts they find unnecessary (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.116-117). Nunan (2013) agrees on these points in the introduction and discussions of classroom observations in *Research Methods in Language Learning*, he also adds that the classroom is a natural place to research since, they are specifically made for educating (Nunan, 2013, p.91).

Nunan (2013) draws attention to the importance of the location where the observation is conducted and most importantly on the difference between a genuine classroom and a classroom designed or chosen with research, and or data collection in mind (Nunan, 2013, p.92). At the end of the chapter, Nunan brings up how disturbing he finds it that most studies in regard to teaching in a classroom, are not actually conducted in a genuine classroom, but rather with a classroom designed for the research, or with a classroom in mind. In regard to Nunan (2013) and the problem with genuine classrooms, this research was conducted at an actual upper secondary school, and thereby observed a genuine classroom and not one designed for this specific research, something that according to Nunan (2013) creates a more reliable research.

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) also write that it is important to map out the social situation your observation will take place in through finding the 3 main parts of the situation: the actors, the activity, and the location (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.126-127). In this study, the actors observed are the teacher Emma and her students at a genuine upper secondary school with less than 100 students in the south of Sweden. The school has a combination of a vocational and university preparatory program, but the students are not separated into different classes depending on their choice of program. The activity observed was a literature lesson, the

location was the classroom, and, the main focus during the observations was on the activity since the research focused on how Emma taught her students about critical theory.

Kamwangamalu (2010) writes about the term observer's paradox which can be a problem when observing a lesson since the data collected should be as authentic and uncensored as possible, but if a person knows they are being watched they might perform differently than in an unobserved setting (Kamwangamalu, 2010, p.132). Observer's paradox is important to have in mind when conducting research since the desired results are the ones that mirror the reality. Since the teacher did not know that I would observe her whilst planning the lessons, and since I did not tell her about my area of research before visiting, I have tried to avoid the observer's paradox as much as possible, but it might still influence the class dynamics, the teacher's choice of words and so on.

There are different ways of taking field notes and Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) put a lot of pressure on the importance of being unobtrusive which limits the possibility to take extensive notes. They bring up the examples of an observer writing frantically in a notebook or sitting with his or her computer as something that might disrupt the natural flow of the situation observed and therefore, they think it is better to take short notes whilst observing that will help refresh the memory when revisiting them later. They also discuss the importance of writing your complete field notes as soon as possible after observing, since it is easy to forget the details associated with your short notes if you wait (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.135-138). To minimize my impact on the classroom and thereby the observer's paradox I followed Wilkinson and Birmingham's (2003) recommendation regarding note taking and sat in the back of the classroom with only a notebook and pen to keep a record of what I observed and wrote more extensive notes shortly after the lesson ended.

Introducing oneself as a researcher is something Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) bring up as a way for the students to be more comfortable with your presence (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.124-125). To follow the advice of Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) I had the opportunity to start with a short introduction of myself, and my essay whilst the teacher prepared for the lesson. During my introduction, I told them that I had been a student at the school a couple of years back and explained that I am writing an essay where I study literature work in upper secondary school. Since I had been observing other classes at the school earlier this semester most of the students recognised me, I also mentioned that the teacher was the main subject of the observation and not the students.

For this project classroom observations have mainly had the function of answering the first three research questions, thereby the ones regarding: if the teacher works with critical theory and critical literacy in regard to literature, how they might use it, which theories are used and how the teacher talks about them.

Questionnaire

Nunan (2013) writes about questionnaires in his chapter on elicitation techniques. He says that elicitation techniques are very common in research and that one study found that more than half of the studies studied used some kind of elicitation technique (Nunan, 2013, p.136). Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) say that questionnaires are a tool that makes it possible for the researcher to collect data from a large portion of people, it is more time efficient than interviews. One of the downsides is that the responses might not mirror what the researcher wishes, and it is hard, if not impossible, to ask follow-up questions (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.7). This is something Nunan (2013) agrees with and adds that it is especially clear in graduate students who found the data collected from questionnaires to be more susceptible than those from field notes or transcripts (Nunan, 2013, p.143).

The problem of answers not mirroring the expectations is something that I had to involve whilst analysing the results of the questionnaires. If a student thought that he or she knew what the answer to a question was, but then makes it clear that their definition does not coincide with the one used for this essay, I need to mention this in my result and compensate for it.

There are different types of questionnaires, but since the questionnaires for this essay were distributed to the students at the school that I was observing the one used for this project was the group-administered questionnaire. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) say that one of the positive aspects of group-administered questionnaires is that since the participants are already gathered the response rate is higher than for example mail or drop-off questionnaires (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p. 10). I distributed the questionnaire to a total of 56 students. 25 students in English 5, and 20 students in English 6; these were the same English 5 and 6 classes that I observed during my classroom observations. Even though I did not have the possibility to observe a lesson with them, I gathered results from the 11 students attending English 7 as well.

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) also bring up the different types of questions one can use in a questionnaire (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.10-11). In my questionnaire, I used a mix of closed questions and open-ended questions for the students to answer. Continuing, Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) described closed questions as very restricted since you give the participants both the question and the possible answer, for example, a yes or no question. To receive more information from the closed questions a follow-up question can be an open-ended where the participants are given more room to analyse and write their own thoughts (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.10-11). Nunan (2013) agrees with Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) on the fact that a closed question only involves alternatives for answers that the researcher chose. He also makes the comment that even if a questionnaire that exclusively consists of closed questions might be easier to collect and analyse, you are more

likely to get the responders actual thoughts through open questions. In connection to this, he makes a couple of comments on the importance of how one asks questions in a questionnaire to avoid the responders trying to please the researcher, he also talks about the importance of being clear when formulating the questions in order to avoid confusing the responders (Nunan, 2013, p.143).

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) talk about piloting your questionnaire to a sample group since they can see things from a different perspective not being read up on the subject in the same way as the researcher is. They say that piloting is a way to find problems in your questionnaire such as unclear questions or fault in the design (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.19). I piloted my questionnaire through sending it to a student who attends a different upper secondary school and, therefore, falls within the same age range and approximate knowledge level as the students in this study. I also sent the questionnaire to some of my colleagues at the teacher education program to get their opinion on it, the questionnaire is available in the appendices. In this research the questionnaire was used to help answer the research question which focuses on: if the students are aware of using critical theory, and, which lenses they might be using, both consciously and unconsciously.

The definitions of the different theories used in the questionnaire are a combination of the ones used in Tyson (2015), and Purdue OWLs page on *Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism*. I decided to use these specific sources since they describe the different theories in a similar way as I have learnt and defines them; but also, because they are written by professionals in the field and should, therefore, be trustworthy. Nevertheless, there will be sources or persons that would argue that these definitions are incomplete, or even wrong. The choice to include these descriptions was made to help the students identify theories they might be using even if they have not heard about the concept earlier; but also, to ensure that the students' definitions match the ones used for this essay.

Interview

Nunan (2013) starts his section on interviews by stating that they have been used by researchers looking into second language learning for a long time (Nunan, 2013, p.149). Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) agree with this and adds that interviews have been used to find detailed information about a topic and that interviews are a good alternative when other methods will not suffice. One of the reasons for interviews being used less than for example questionnaires is that interviews require more resources for the researcher since you need to find the time to prepare, conduct, and analyse the interview data, however, the data collected during an interview is often more rewarding (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.43-44). An interview was conducted as a part of this case study since the data collected from observations and questionnaires were not sufficient to answer the research questions, especially in regard to the last question, where the teacher's thoughts on critical theory were discussed.

According to Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003), there are three different types of interviews: the unstructured, the semi-structured, and the structured interview (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.44). Both Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) and Nunan (2010) describes the semi-structured interview as an interview where a plan is present but instead of defined questions the researcher has prepared themes to discuss, this allows for the interviewee to speak more freely and for the researcher to ask follow up, as well as, complementary questions (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.43-45; Nunan, 2010, p.149). After reading these sections I decided that a semi-structured interview was the best one to complement the data collected through the other methods.

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) also write about how the interview should be planned; their suggestion is to group questions based on their theme and move from general, towards more specific questions using something they call a "funnelling technique" (p.47) to create a

more relaxed setting (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.47). The discussion about using different kinds of questions reappear when planning an interview as in the questionnaire, the researcher needs to choose between open or closed questions (Nunan, 2013, p.143, 151). This is something that Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) also write about and they give the advice to use open-ended questions since they let the interviewee speak more freely and thereby provide more information (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.53).

Similar to when creating a questionnaire, the importance of piloting your questions are brought up, since this helps to identify potential problems such as vague questions or if the questions lack a natural flow to them (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.52). Nunan (2013) agrees with this and writes that piloting your interview questions gives you the opportunity to make sure that the questions are sufficient to gather the information you need, as well as ensuring that the questions will be understood by the interviewee (Nunan, 2013, p.151). To help ensure the clarity of the questions I both piloted them on colleagues at the teacher education program and sent them to the interviewee beforehand, so she had the opportunity to ask questions, or ask me to clarify anything if needed. Since it was a semi-structured interview, there was also the possibility for the interviewee to ask for clarifications during the interview.

Further on Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) discuss the methods of recording the interview, they advise making an audio recording to transcribe later in order to be sure that you do not miss anything of the conversations whilst taking notes. They make some comparisons of using audio versus video recording and argues that depending on the situation which the interview takes place one might prefer the video alternative (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.47, 51). Nunan (2013) makes a comparison between using audio recordings and note-taking whilst conducting an interview, he gives examples of strengths and weaknesses of both. In the case of audio recordings, he mentions that it: gives the opportunity to analyse data after the interview, that it shows the actual language used, and that it is objective. He writes that these

examples are to be seen as strengths even though it takes time to transcribe and that the knowledge of being recorded might make the interviewee censor their answers. In regard to note taking Nunan (2013) continues through saying that its advantages are that statements not relevant to the questions can be ignored, that it is economical and that it focuses on the central issues discussed. The disadvantages of note taking can be that the linguistics of the interview are not recorded, you risk being bias towards the facts you find most interesting or important and the data collected could be questioned. Because of these points Nunan (2013) advises to make an audio recording of the interview, but also written notes to help ease the workload during the transcription (Nunan, 2013, p.152-153).

The interview was conducted through a phone call between me and Emma, the call was recorded and later transcribed, both the transcript and the interview questions can be found in the appendices. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) discuss the pros and cons of conducting an interview through telephone versus face to face. One of the disadvantages is that the researcher loses the interviewees body language; therefore, they suggest to only use telephone interviews when conducting shorter and less detailed interviews (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003, p.55,59).

Limitations

Classroom observation.

One of the limitations of the classroom observation is the risk of adding too much of your own thoughts or implications of what is happening during the observation and thereby not having observation notes that are true to what happened. A second limitation in regard to classroom observations is the possibility that the teacher does not work with the area researched during the lessons observed, something that could be relevant to take into regard especially if the researcher does not want to tell the teacher what he or she will be looking at beforehand.

Questionnaire.

The problem of answers not mirroring the expectations is something that has to be involved whilst analysing the results of the questionnaires. If a student thinks he or she knows what the answer to a question is, but then it becomes clear that their definition does not concur with the literature used for the essay, there is a need to mention this in the result section and compensate for it. In this questionnaire the main thing to worry about in regard to students answering without being sure is in the last question, where they are asked to identify the different theories or lenses, they believe that they are using. This is something that I need to take into consideration whilst analysing the questionnaire. But also, that one does not solely rely on the answers from the questionnaire when analysing the combined results for this essay. Besides this, there is always a risk that the students do not understand a part of the questionnaire due to it being in English. To minimize this risk, I stated multiple times that if the students had any questions they were to ask me, I also walked around the classroom when they were doing the questionnaire asking if they had any questions or if something was hard to understand.

Interview.

Something that could create a problem with the interview in this study is that it was not possible to conduct the interview face to face but had to be done through a telephone. This means that it was impossible to see any facial expressions or body language used. Another limitation is that Emma wished to conduct the interview in Swedish, thereby I needed to translate the interview into English which includes the risk of losing information whilst translating the transcript.

Results and Analysis

In this section, the analysis and discussion of data collected throughout the research will be presented. Starting with the work done by both the teacher and her students in the classroom,

then the students' awareness of critical theory will be brought up, and finally, the teachers view on critical literacy.

Classroom Work With Critical Theory and Critical Literacy

During the observations the teacher worked with literature in both English 5 and English 6; in English 5 they worked with fairy tales with a twist by Roald Dahl, and in English 6 with the novel *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, both of these texts gave opportunities for work with critical literacy. When the teacher was interviewed, one of the questions asked was if she had any critical theories in mind when planning the lessons. One part of her answer to this question was in regard to *The Giver*:

I thought about the society we live in today, the society where the students are growing up, and later are supposed to inherit and keep developing. I want the students to reflect and question the community Jonas lives in, the fact that he has to suppress his feelings and not express his thoughts and ideas. I want them to react to it and be critical to a society like that. They should dare to express their opinions and fight for what they think is right or wrong. That was my thought behind working with this book (Appendix B, p.3).

This comment is strongly connected to Skolverket (2013) where it is stated that the school should help students find their personal views, ways to think critically, and find pros and cons of different views and alternatives (Skolverket, 2013, p. 4-5). Emma's comment is a paraphrase of these parts of the curriculum, but it is also a comment that follows Tyson (2015) explanation of what cultural theory includes. Amongst the definitions of cultural criticism, Tyson (2015) includes seeing differences between the values in the world they live in and the world of the literature they are reading (Tyson, 2015, p.282).

Even if Emma did not specifically talk about using psychoanalytical criticism, I found that during the observation a lot of the work was strongly connected to it, especially since *The Giver*

is a book regarding feelings and how society would work with a population who is not feeling anything. One exercise Emma gave the students was inspired by a reoccurring event of the book, where the characters took part in something called ‘telling of dreams’ in the morning and ‘telling of feelings’ in the evening. These two activities involved the characters sitting down together and talking about the dreams they had during the night and the feelings they might have felt during the day. During the class, the students were given different roles to play whilst doing the exercise and after the lesson, Emma told me that the roleplaying was a way to help engage the students in the exercise.

The main reason behind why I connected these lessons and the work the students and teacher did to psychoanalytical theory is because Tyson’s (2015) explanations of psychoanalytical criticism includes understanding the characters motives and actions depending on psychoanalytical concepts such as: love, sexuality, the phenomena of death, and crises (Tyson, 2015, p. 37). During one of the lessons they did an exercise where the students received pictures from the teacher and were supposed to write down what they associated with the picture, and amongst the pictures the colour red appeared which led to a discussion regarding the importance of one of the characters, a love interest of the main character, having fiery red hair and how it could have been used as a symbol for sexual desire and love.

In regard to the work with fairy tales with a twist, Emma said that she wanted to make the students aware of how a story change over time mainly due to who tells it and whom it is told to. She said that this created an opportunity to work with the stories from a historical perspective since the teller and audience are strongly dependent on the surrounding society. Another thing she wanted the students to see was the importance time has in storytelling, she demonstrated this through giving them the exercise to write their own twists on classic stories, the outcome of these were coloured by the society the students are growing up in. One thing that I observed in relation to this was that many of the stories contained instances of rape and drugs, both of

which are present in today's media in different ways. This is something Tyson (2015) brings up whilst discussing new historical and cultural criticism looking into the way a text is connected to the time period it was written in, if one can find any connections between the text and what is known about the cultures of society at the time (Tyson, 2014, p.285-286).

During the interview, Emma also reflected over how she works with critical theory, and she said that "... I have realised that I might not use the terms critical theory even though I use it as a method. But we do analyse, put things into a context and tries to examine things critically" (Appendix B, p.3). This statement agreed with my findings from the observations, where Emma made her students work with different theories but did not tell them explicitly that this is what they were doing.

Students Awareness of Critical Theory

Moving on from the classroom work with critical theory to the perception's students have regarding their knowledge of critical theory. The data in this section comes mainly from the analysis of the questionnaire the students attending English 5, 6, and 7 answered, the questions from the questionnaire are available in the appendices.

The first question of the questionnaire asked if the students were aware of the concept of critical theory. On this question, only 3 of 56 students answered yes, and out of those 3 only 1 of them could describe it. When the question was rephrased and asked if the students were aware of using different 'lenses' whilst reading half of the students, 28 of the 56, answered yes and could give some sort of descriptions of the lenses they use. Most of the students answered somewhere along the lines of 'Using my own lenses' which would point towards the students being conscious of reading texts and analysing it from different perspectives, even if they mainly originate from their own experiences. This could be a direct consequence of Emma's choice to work with different critical theories but not telling the students about them. Which

could have led to the students absorbing theories and beliefs or ways to analyse, which makes them aware of analysing the text but not knowing what the background of their analysis is.

The theory most students indicated that they use when analysing a text was psychoanalytical criticism. I expected the students of English 6 to place psychoanalytical criticism in the top due to the nature of *The Giver*, however, that it would be the most chosen one in both English 5 and 7 as well surprised me. When reading Tyson's (2015) explanations of psychoanalytical criticism it includes understanding the characters motives and actions depending on psychoanalytical concepts such as: love, sexuality, the phenomena of death, and crises (Tyson, 2015, p. 37). That students relate to psychoanalytical theory could be partly related to their earlier education. In the syllabus for Swedish grade 6-9 one of the requirements is to understand and separate themes, motives and purposes of texts (Skolverket, 2011a, p.6). This means that the students learn about finding motives and explanations in Swedish texts already at secondary school and that they bring this with them into upper secondary school and English. The understanding of themes and ideas in literature is also a key point in the syllabus for English 6 (Skolverket, 2011b, p.7). I would argue that this is strongly connected to critical theory and critical lenses since many books for young adults and teenagers have implications or focuses directly on subjects such as love, sexuality and death. In the book *The Giver* that the students in English 6 read, all three were involved, the main character goes through puberty and experiences feelings of love as well as, sexual awakening. Death also has a reoccurring role in the book where it is called to 'relieve' a person to give them a lethal injection. (Lowry, 1993)

Continuing, the theory which the next to most students indicated that they used was the new historical and cultural criticism which was chosen 29 times. The high frequency of answers in regard to this theory goes well with the answers Emma gave during the interview where she indicated that one of the things, she finds most important whilst teaching literature is that it can help us understand humans better, since literature makes it possible to see and understand how

people have been thinking during different times and different parts of the world (Appendix B, p.2). In other words, how, humans and texts have changed through history and over different cultures. This in combination with the requirements placed on students to be critical of sources are two strong arguments for the use of new historical and cultural criticism in teaching. Skolverket brings up both the importance of students being source-critical and understanding of cultural differences in the syllabus for English in upper secondary school which shows that it is something all students needs to know when graduating (Skolverket, 2011b, p.3, 7, 11).

In the case of new historical and cultural criticism I also believe that the areas addressed in the syllabus are connected to the theory, the theory includes knowledge of how, where and why a text has been written. This is a great way for the students to practise criticism of the source which is required by Skolverket (2011) but also to find the motives of a text which was brought up in the previous paragraph. Even though it is possible to read a text and find motives, criticism of the source, feelings of love and sexuality without consciously searching for them; I would say that you are using critical theories or critical lenses unconsciously since when we read something either in the search for knowledge or pleasure, the things we read has an impact on us and we think or analyse what we have read, which implies working in accordance to parts of critical theory.

As discussed earlier, one of the risks or limitations with using a questionnaire is that the students guess the answers instead of making sure that they actually know or understand the answers they are indicating. One other thing that is important to point out is that my definition of critical theory or critical reading is the same as analytical reading, some might argue that the two are not synonyms due to analytical reading working with different specific frameworks while critical theory is less controlled, however, I believe that they are the same since there are specific guidelines for the different critical theories as well.

Teachers Thoughts on Critical Theory and Critical Literacy

The last research question is in regard to whether the teacher plans to use critical theories with her students or not. As stated, earlier Emma believes that working with critical literacy in the classroom is important since it helps develop the student's ability to think and analyse things critically. May (1995) writes that it is important to work with critical literacy with children to help them become critical thinkers (May, 1995, p.vii-ix, 7), and during the interview Emma agrees on this through saying, "So, by working with literature I wish to help develop my student into critical thinkers, so that they can see connections and reflect between common denominators both over time and in different contexts." (Appendix B, p.2).

Bacon (2017) and Chun (2009) both discussed whether critical literacy is something teachers should include in their teaching since there are researchers who believe that it is to complicate for second language learners; however, they reach the conclusion that critical theory should be a natural part of teaching literature since they go hand in hand (Bacon, 2017, p.425; Chun, 2009, p.146, 152). These conflicting voices within educational research caused two of the interview questions to be regarding Emma's thoughts on the difficulty's students might have grasping critical theory, especially in a second language. Her answer to the question if there is any specific part of critical theory the students seem to have more difficulties with was: "Not really, but it depends on the age of the students. If they do not have the previous knowledge, or historical background of a subject for example, the apartheid in South Africa, a problem might appear" (Appendix B, p.3). To tackle this problem, she suggested working with teachers from other subjects if there is an obvious gap that needs to be filled. Since Emma also works as a teacher of Swedish one of the questions asked was if she believed that it would be beneficial to teach the students about critical theory in Swedish, or their first language, first and then implement it on English. But to this, she said that the only reason for this to benefice the students would be if there were terms or concepts that they did not understand. (Appendix B, p.4)

Conclusion

Critical theory is an area that has received a large variety of opinions from researchers, some like Chun (2009), and Bacon (2017) believes that teaching critical theory is a natural part of literature and language learning, and therefore, they believe that it should be natural in second language learning as well (Bacon, 2017, p.425; Chun, 2009, p.146, 152). Even so, Bacon (2017) brings up conflicting voices who believe that critical theory is far too complicated for learners who are not fluent in the language (Bacon, 2017, p.425).

The teacher I have based this study on, made use of critical literacy when working with literature of different types. This was done through indicating the use of different critical theories, such as new historical and cultural criticism, with the hope that it will help her students become critical thinkers who can express their opinions and thereby help build a better society in the future. Even if the teacher worked with critical theory in different ways most of the students, at least in the earlier years of upper secondary school, were unaware of using critical theory, as well as critical lenses whilst working with literature. One reason for this could be that the teacher did not use the term critical theory or critical literacy whilst working with the different methods, instead, she taught the students through indicating different ways of analysing literature and other texts they read.

In conclusion, critical theory and critical literacy seem to be an important part of upper secondary school education in Sweden and even if the teacher does not call it critical theory, it is something that they work with and most students are aware of using different lenses when reaching English 7. That critical theory is important, is shown mainly through the syllabi and curriculum for upper secondary school, that regulates the areas of English the students are supposed to learn before graduating (Skolverket, 2011b).

Connection to professional practise

The connections between this essay and the possibility to use it beneficially in the profession come from a combination of the research being conducted in a genuine upper secondary school classroom and the connection to the syllabi for English. My hopes are that this essay will be useful for teachers who are not sure about using critical theory with their students. Especially in the second language classroom and with younger learners; too help remove the belief that critical theory is too advanced for second language learners.

Suggestions for further research

To conduct future research on this area it would be interesting to see how other teachers work with critical theory and critical literacy when teaching literature, but also to see how critical theory might be used in more contexts than the strictly literary. This would necessitate a study over a longer time period and with more than one teacher since that would make it possible to compare and contrast their different working methods, and thereby getting a more generalisable result and conclusion.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Questionnaire.

Hi!

My name is Erica Molin, at the moment I study at Lunds University to become an upper secondary school (Gymnasiet) teacher in English and History. During this term I am writing an essay about something called Critical Theory in regard to education and therefore you have received this survey to help me gather information. The survey is entirely anonymous which means that even I won't know who gave which answer. If you have any questions do not hesitate to ask me, I will be present during the entire survey.

Thanks for helping me with my essay!
Best regards Erica Molin

How to fill in the paper survey

Below you can see how you mark an answer option in the check boxes, and how you change a selection.

- The answer option has been marked correctly
- The answer option has been marked incorrectly, the cross must be in the middle of the box
- The answer option has been marked incorrectly, the cross is too strong
- Changed selection, the answer option will not be counted as being marked



1. Are you familiar with the concept of critical theory?

Yes

No

2. Could you please describe critical theory using your own words?

3. Are you aware of using different "lenses" whilst reading? (Med "lenses" menas att man har olika perspektiv när man läser något)

Yes

No

4. Which "lenses" do you think that you are using whilst reading or analysing a text?

Critical lenses

Critical theory deals with different ways to analyze a text, either from the perspectives we carry with us due to our past and experiences or from deciding before we start reading that I will look at this text from this or that perspective.

5. Please indicate the lenses you think that you are using whilst analyzing a text.

- Psychoanalytic criticism: Psychological criticism deals with a work of literature primarily as an expression, in fictional form, of the personality, state of mind, feelings, and desires of its author. The assumption of psychoanalytic critics is that a work of literature is correlated with its author's mental traits. Builds on Sigmund Freud and his theories of psychology.
- Marxist criticism: Marxist criticism is based on the theories of Karl Marx (and so influenced by philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel), this school concerns itself with class differences, economic and otherwise, as well as the implications and complications of the capitalist system
- Feminist criticism: Feminist criticism looks at how aspects of our culture are inherently patriarchal (male dominated) and how this critique strives to expose the explicit and implicit misogyny in male writing about women
- New Criticism: New Criticism is directed against the current concern of critics with the lives and psychology of authors, with social background, and with literary history
- Structuralist criticism: Structuralism investigates the kinds of patterns that are built up and broken down within a text and uses them to get at an interpretation of that text
- New historical and cultural criticism: New historical and cultural criticism requires that you apply to a text specific historical information about the time during which an author wrote. History, in this case, refers to the social, political, economic, cultural, and/or intellectual climate of the time
- Lesbian, gay, and queer criticism: Lesbian, gay, and queer criticism explores issues of sexuality, power, and marginalized populations (woman as other) in literature and culture the manner in which gender and sexuality is discussed.
- African American criticism: African American criticism foregrounds race (racial identity, African American cultural traditions, psychology, politics, and so forth) as the object of analysis because race, in America, informs our individual and cultural psychology, and therefore our literature, in profound ways
- Postcolonial criticism: Postcolonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion, and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony (Western colonizers controlling the colonized).
- Other, please specify

Appendix B

Interview questions

Information about the Participant:

1. For how long have you worked as a teacher?
2. How many of those years have been as a teacher of English?
3. What ages have you taught?
4. Do you have any other subject than English?

Participant's perception of critical theory/literacy in education:

1. Do you think that it is important to teach literature whilst teaching English?
 - a. Is there any specific reason that you think that it is so important?
2. When you are working with literature do you make an effort to include critical theory or critical lenses?
 - a. Do you feel that there are any parts of critical theory that the students have a harder time to grasp?
3. When you planned the lessons on *the Giver* and fairy tales with a twist, did you have any thoughts on how to use critical theory with these texts?
4. Since you are a teacher of Swedish as well, I wonder if you work with the concept of critical theory during Swedish lessons?
 - a. Do you think that there are any advantages in teaching the students about critical theory in Swedish before implementing it on English?

Transcription of interview 12/12-18:

Me – First of all I want to confirm that it is okay that I record this interview and later transcribe it and publish it as a part of my research.

Emma – Absolutely, that is fine.

M – Good, for how long have you worked as a teacher?

E – I have worked as a teacher since 1998, so 20 years now.

M – How many of those years have been as a teacher of English?

E – 20 years as well.

M – Okay, what ages have you taught?

E – I have taught year 6-9 and upper secondary school, so students between the ages of 12 and 19.

M – Do you have any other subject than English?

E – Yes, Swedish.

M – Okay, do you think that it is important to teach literature whilst teaching English?

E – Absolutely, the definition of teaching literature can be discussed, but I work a lot with fiction, novellas and other texts, so I think that it is very important.

M – Is there any specific reason that you think that it is so important?

E – I believe that we can learn more about humans, cultures and societal structures through literature, in literature, we can find more or less everything that has to do with humans both today and through history. So, by working with literature I wish to help develop my student into critical thinkers so that they can see connections and reflect between common denominators both over time and in different contexts. There are universal problems on earth that everyone struggles with, and that is one thing that I think it is interesting to discuss with the students.

M – When you are working with literature do you make an effort to include critical theory or critical lenses?

E – Hmh yes, I do, but I have realised that I might not use the terms critical theory even though I use it as a method. But we do analyse, put things into a context and tries to examine things critically.

M – Do you feel that there are any parts of critical theory that the students have a harder time to grasp?

E – Not really, but it depends on the age of the students. If they do not have the previous knowledge, or historical background of a subject, for example, the apartheid in South Africa, a problem might appear. In that case, it is very important to help the students understand the context of the book. If this is the case a collaboration between teachers, a history teacher, for example, can be a good way to deal with the problem. This is something I have done earlier, and it creates the opportunity for thematic teaching.

M – When you planned the lessons on *the Giver* and fairy tales with a twist, did you have any thoughts on how to use critical theory with these texts?

E – When I worked with *the Giver*, I thought about the society we live in today, the society where the students are growing up, and later are supposed to inherit and keep developing. I want the students to reflect and question the community Jonas lives in, the fact that he has to suppress his feelings and not express his thoughts and ideas. I want them to react to it and be critical to a society like that. They should dare to express their opinions and fight for what they think is right or wrong. That was my thought behind working with this book.

The fairy tales worked from a historical perspective since they show how stories changes depending on the context, they are told in. It depends on who tells the story, who the audience

is and the bond between the two. A story is only true in the context of which it is told, so this was something I wanted to show the students, but also that they can be co-creators of stories. This was shown through the exercise where the students got to write their own versions of classic fairy tales.

M – Yes, I remember that. Since you are a teacher of Swedish as well, I wonder if you work with the concept of critical theory during Swedish lessons?

E – I do not see any difference between using critical theory in Swedish versus English. I think that I use it similarly, or at least I have the same starting points for planning literature lessons in Swedish as I have in English. So yes, I definitely use it.

M – Do you think that there are any advantages in teaching the students about critical theory in Swedish before implementing it on English?

E – Perhaps strictly linguistically, if you are going to use terms that they need to understand it might be good, especially if the students are a bit younger. But otherwise, I do not see any advantages of presenting it in Swedish first.

M – Okay that was the questions I had for you. Thank you very much.