

“We’re Never Going to Make Readers if Reading Is Always Difficult”

How Students’ Reading Habits Affect Upper-Secondary-School Teachers’ English Literature Instruction



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Abstract

Despite the consensus that reading is good for the individual, teachers seem to report the existence of a different mindset in the classroom as they struggle to motivate students to read. Research has indicated the existence of a growing gap between weak and strong readers, and that the fast-paced and technologically advanced society of today is noticeably affecting students' reading habits. However, previous research has often chosen to focus on specific topics concerning students' reading but has failed to address how teachers are affected by this situation and how it affects their literature instruction. This thesis attempts to understand how seven English upper-secondary teachers in Sweden are affected by their students' disposition to read fiction, their levels of motivation, and how their attitudes towards doing so are demonstrated in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these teachers to gather information about how they experienced this situation, along with which methods and strategies they chose to use when teaching fiction to students of varying levels of reading proficiency. The results of this study confirm the existence of a gap between levels of reading proficiency and highlight how important it is to provide support and strategies adapted to the students' varying needs. An appropriate reading environment, a focus on students' interests and backgrounds, and a well-structured literature unit are necessary when working to improve students' reading habits and their ability to read for pleasure.

Keywords: The Matthew effect, fiction, Swedish upper-secondary school, English, teachers

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Theoretical Framework | 4 |
| <i>The Matthew Effect</i> | 4 |
| Previous Research | 7 |
| <i>Reading Discouragement</i> | 7 |
| <i>Students' Motivation and Attitudes Towards Reading</i> | 8 |
| <i>Reading Strategies</i> | 12 |
| <i>Connection to Teaching Practices and Skolverket's Requirements</i> | 14 |
| Methodology | 16 |
| <i>Data Collection Procedures</i> | 16 |
| <i>Ethical Principles Regarding Research</i> | 18 |
| <i>Analysing Data Through the Use of a Content-Analysis Table</i> | 19 |
| <i>Validity and Reliability</i> | 20 |
| Results and Analysis | 20 |
| <i>Is There a Decline in Students' Reading Habits?</i> | 21 |
| <i>Different Levels of Reading Proficiency</i> | 22 |
| <i>Why Have Students' Reading Habits Changed and Why Have Some Students Fallen Behind?</i> | 23 |
| <i>Literature Instruction and the Effects of Students' Attitudes and Motivation</i> | 25 |
| <i>Behind the Scenes of Literature Units</i> | 25 |
| <i>How Do the Interviewed Teachers' Students Express Their Attitudes Towards Reading?</i> | 27 |
| <i>Combatting Students' Negative Attitudes Towards Reading</i> | 29 |
| <i>Reading for Assessments and Grades</i> | 30 |
| <i>The Importance of Reading and of Reading for Pleasure</i> | 32 |
| <i>Strategies and Support while Working with Fiction</i> | 35 |
| Conclusion | 37 |
| References | 41 |
| Appendix A | 45 |
| Appendix B | 46 |
| Appendix C | 50 |
| Appendix D | 51 |

Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2016), or OECD, there has been a decrease in Swedish students' reading skills since the beginning of this millennium up until 2015 when the first signs of improvement began to show (p. 1). In spite of these slight improvements, the OECD (2016) and the Swedish National Agency for Education (2019), henceforth referred to as Skolverket, report the existence of a growing large gap between 'weak' and 'strong' readers (p. 1; pp. 16-17). While a considerable amount of current research centres on this gap between younger readers (Lipka & Siegel, 2011; Mullan, 2010; Stanovich, 1986), the same gap continues to exist between students in upper-secondary school. Despite there being some strong readers in the classroom, one of the interviewed teachers in this study, Gavin, explains that upper-secondary teachers are never going to be able to compensate for, and repair, the result of 16 years of poor reading habits. This presents teachers with the challenge of meeting the needs of older students with varying levels of reading proficiency within the same classroom.

The seven English teachers interviewed for this thesis were asked questions about how the aforementioned gap affects their teaching of fiction¹, in the form of prose. The reason for this research project's focus on fiction derives from Oatley's (2011) Social-Improvement Hypothesis, which he describes as the ability for a reader to sympathise and empathise with characters in different novels (p. 43). This could be regarded as practice before meeting and understanding other people in the 'real' world. In turn, these aspects of reading fiction are relevant to the requirements in Skolverket's (2013) curriculum for the Swedish upper-secondary school. Teachers are to teach their students about the democratic values and human rights that the Swedish school is based on; no student should be "be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion [...], transgender identity or its expression,

¹ Any mentions of "literature" or "literature units" are meant to be understood as dealing with fiction.

sexual orientation, age or functional impairment” (p. 4). In short, teaching fiction has the potential to allow students to develop and practice empathy while simultaneously fulfilling Skolverket’s requirements.

Several studies take into account what hinders individuals from reading, or which benefits exist from engaging with literature. However, these studies are often narrow in scope, with focus on specific topics or theories related to reading, instead of providing perspective on where these problems stem from, and how they affect the education sector. For example, Cho and Krashen (2016) focus their article on researching what it takes to become long-term pleasure readers, and Papadima-Sophocleous (2009) centred his work on explaining if and how teenagers can be motivated to read literature. However, less attention has been paid to teachers and their point of view about how they adapt their teaching methods to both weak and strong readers and how they try to motivate teenagers to read. One research project, conducted by Ellen Karlsson (2015), touches upon a broader field that has several topics in common with this study, by exploring how motivation and the reading of English literature in Swedish upper-secondary schools are perceived by students and teachers. Nevertheless, what is missing from this is an analysis of how the reading habits that students bring with them to upper-secondary school, along with how the gap between weak and strong readers, acknowledged by both the OECD (2019) and Skolverket (2019), affects the teachers’ literature instruction. The OECD’s PISA test results encompass several areas that affect students’ reading proficiency. However, as Nordberg (2014) states in his thesis, it is difficult to draw conclusions about teenagers’ attitudes towards reading and literature based on quantitative results (p. 4).

This study aims to research what contributes to the growing gap and to which extent it may be apparent in the classrooms of seven English teachers in Swedish upper-secondary schools. Furthermore, this research project explores how the gap, along with students’ attitudes and motivation towards reading, affects these seven teachers’ approaches to teaching fiction. Some

examples of approaches to teaching fiction are the ways in which the interviewed teachers choose to create assessments, which strategies they turn to when attempting to engage/motivate students, and the support they feel that students of both weak and strong levels of reading proficiency may need.

Due to the limited scope of interviewees in this research project, the results cannot be generalised to a larger population. These results should instead be regarded as an example of how some English teachers choose to approach teaching fiction in Swedish upper-secondary schools. The following questions serve to address the previously mentioned problems regarding teaching fiction:

1. Do the interviewed teachers recognise a gap, in their classes, between their students with strong reading habits/proficiency and those with weak ones? If so, how does this gap affect the interviewed teachers' literature instruction and choice of fictive texts?
2. How do the interviewed teachers adapt their teaching as an effect of students' attitudes and motivation towards reading and fiction?
3. Which teaching methods do the interviewed teachers use to support their students during the reading process?

This research project takes into account the fact that the answers to these research questions will be based on seven teachers and their retelling of their teaching methods and their recollection of experiences with students.

The remainder of this thesis is divided into five sections, not including the reference list and four appendices. The first section is titled "Theoretical Framework" and provides a detailed description of the Matthew effect, which is used to explain the gap between weak and strong readers. The following section is titled "Previous Research" and is a research-based background that has been divided into four subcategories: reading discouragement, students' motivation and

attitudes towards reading, reading strategies, and connection to teaching practices. The contents of this section support the analysis of the teacher interviews. The third section is titled “Methodology” and explains the method and ethics of the data collection procedures, the categorisation of the transcribed interviews, and the validity and reliability of the research project. The final sections are titled “Results and Analysis” and “Conclusion” and provide an in-depth analysis of the interviewed teachers’ experiences, methods, and strategies, supported by and in conjunction with the previous research background. The conclusion serves as a summary of the analysis and includes mentions of limitations and directions for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework and research background of this thesis will provide the reader with a foundation of previous knowledge regarding this research area. The theory that will permeate this study is the Matthew effect, and it will serve as a tool for analysing the contents of the interviewees’ answers.

The Matthew Effect

The following passage from the Bible influenced the naming of the social phenomenon known as the Matthew effect: “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath” (Matthew 13:12). Stanovich (1986) coined this term in his study, “Matthew Effects in Reading: Some Consequences of Individual Differences in the Acquisition of Literacy”, which offers a possible explanation for the disparity between the different levels of reading proficiency among upper-secondary-school students. His study aims to present alternative ways of understanding the relationship between “cognitive processes and reading ability” (p. 361) as he feels that other

studies fail to explore the implications that this may have on young readers (p. 361). Stanovich (1986) analyses existing research conducted within the same field of thought, and shows how, in contrast to strong readers, poor readers often encounter unrewarding reading experiences early on in their lives, which lead to a perpetually strained relationship to all reading-related activities (p. 364).

Strong readers seem to become better with time whereas weak readers become worse, and this 'rich-get-richer' Matthew effect is a possible reason behind this. The main reason for the difference between the two levels of reading proficiency, according to him, is the volume of reading and 'organism-environment correlations' (Stanovich, 1986, pp. 381-382). Stanovich (1986) postulates that children who become better readers have

selected (e.g., by choosing friends who read or choosing reading as a leisure activity rather than sports or video games), shaped (e.g., by asking for books as presents when young), and evoked (e.g., the child's parents noticed that looking at books was enjoyed or perhaps just that it kept the child quiet) an environment that will be conducive to further growth in reading. (p. 382)

This reasoning presents itself as a stark contrast to the habits and environment created by weaker readers, who do not seem to form the aforementioned productive relationships with their environment.

Taube (2007) continues this train of thought by exemplifying how these students' reading habits and academic achievements are a direct cause of external factors and internalised attitudes. She describes the weaker students as victims of a vicious cycle of behaviour and thought, serving a negative self-fulfilling prophecy as a result of the significant impact that their surrounding has upon their sense of self. When a student begins to show a negative quality of work, it is not uncommon for teachers, parents, and friends to pick up on this and to begin to expect similar results in the future. This turns into a pattern of behaviour, as the student's

environment begins to convey this disappointment and low expectation through body language and comments, both indirect and direct, until the individual in question begins to adopt these views as their own. This deteriorating sense of self kindles a lack of motivation and perseverance, an unwillingness to meet challenges, and an inability to disprove these extrinsic influences. Instead, they throw in the towel when met with challenges and inconvenience.

A common problem encountered at this stage is a lack of efficient strategies. This manifests itself in the form of having difficulties concentrating and understanding what they are being asked to do, as well as if they have appropriately completed the reading task at hand. These students aim to avoid failure at all costs by rejecting input, opinions, and help, to preserve the sense of self-worth they feel they have left, as a type of self-defence mechanism. This defensive behaviour and faltering self-image reinforce their surroundings' low expectations, and the student remains trapped in the aforementioned vicious cycle (pp. 90-91).

Notwithstanding the consequences that the Matthew effect can have on 'weak' students, 'strong' students can reap benefits from this as it affects them positively. Taube (2007) describes how 'weak' students become trapped in a vicious cycle, but she also brings up how the 'strong' ones form part of a 'good' cycle. Students who show early signs of high levels of reading comprehension are met with praise and positive reinforcement from teachers, parents, and classmates. This praise functions as a reward system and motivates the students to continue performing at the same level, or to aim higher, and the teacher begins to expect this level of work in the future. When students are encouraged in this manner, they take the initiative to engage with challenging reading material, which in turn improves their ability to decode words and expands their vocabulary. These students show that they can keep calm, persevere, and use appropriate and effective strategies when dealing with reading tasks, and regard them as an opportunity to show their worth. The student maintains motivation and looks forward to

receiving praise once more, which the teacher abides, and is caught in a ‘good’ cycle leading to continual growth (pp. 92-93).

When applied to this research project, the Matthew effect could potentially elucidate how students who are ‘strong’ readers keep getting better over time, while students who are ‘weak’ readers experience the opposite effect. This effect could also give voice to how students’ display of emotions, attitudes, and motivation could be a direct result of their organism-environment relationship.

Previous Research

This section focuses on students’ attitudes towards reading, the effects of motivation, and teachers’ approaches to teaching fiction and reading strategies. It also serves as a foundation in this thesis’ upcoming analysis to support the seven interviewed teachers’ perspectives and experiences.

Reading Discouragement

According to Skolverket (2019), a gap in reading proficiency between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ readers has been growing significantly between the years 2000 and 2018 (pp. 16-17). This period of about two decades has brought out several changes in the way we, as a society, consume the written word. Vladut (2017) argues that students spend more time on social media since they feel that it benefits them more than reading fiction does (p. 20). Reading fiction goes against the very core of our fast-paced news-consuming society. Papadima-Sophocleous (2009) states that

when people read the sports page, [...] they are interested only in the facts [, and] when they watch television or go to the cinema, after a day’s hard work, they go because they need a break [...] they do not have the time or the energy for anything else. (p. 119)

One rarely engages with fiction to find factual information, but rather to seek enjoyment; however, people do not seem to be turning to fiction after a long day at work. One possible explanation for this is because the individual must pay constant and active attention to the text at hand to derive enjoyment from it, as reading fiction does not allow for distraction (Papadima-Sophocleous, 2009, p. 119). This, along with Vladut's statement about the effect that social media has on reading, exemplifies some of the core reasons as to why reading might be on the decline. When exploring difficulties faced when reading fiction, Vladut (2017) finds that several students seem to have a hard time understanding the meaning of the words they read (p. 23). Another problem that the students in Vladut's (2017) study encountered was their absence of influence on the selection of novels in class, as choosing their own books made them feel more interested in reading (p. 23).

Furthermore, Vladut (2017) and Nordberg (2017) find that students would read more if they were given more time in school, rather than it being their responsibility to find time within their schedules to do so (p. 23; p. 241). Edvardsson's (2017) article about one of her ongoing studies explains that to help students become better readers, teachers need to allocate time for reading during classes and create an open environment for students' literature discussions and their reading experiences (para. 10). The author also discusses how she has seen a change in reading proficiency among her students over the last few years, as well as an increase in the differences in competence between the 'well-performing' students and the 'under-performing' students (para. 2-3). Furthermore, students' motivation and attitudes towards reading seem to also play a large role in the change seen in their reading proficiency.

Students' Motivation and Attitudes Towards Reading

The reading done in school can be described as a paradox. On one hand, Skolverket (2013) states that students must be able to "use non-fiction, fiction and other forms of culture as a

source of knowledge, insight and pleasure” (p. 8), but on the other hand, students are often reading as a means of completing a task or assessment. Kulturrådet (2015) uses ‘nöjesläsning’² as a term to describe the type of reading that is deemed to be enjoyable, and when engaged with over time, it can significantly improve students’ reading proficiency and academic performance (pp. 20, 24). According to Cho and Krashen (2016) and their different case studies, students who are able to choose freely from a broad range of books, and who find the time to plan their reading schedules, are more likely to take an interest in what they read and show signs of becoming long-term pleasure readers (pp. 6-7).

As requested by the government, and to encourage the growth of long-term pleasure readers in Sweden, Kulturrådet has embarked on the quest to promote reading. One of the aims of reading promotion is, according to Kulturrådet (2015), to help others read by developing their reading strategies with the aid of literature made available to them. There is a new field within the spectrum of reading, called reading engagement, which studies individuals’ attitudes towards reading, how much they read in and outside of school, and how they are affected by others who read. Furthermore, reading promotion resolves to increase reading motivation, expand the interest in reading, and improve attitudes towards reading (pp. 11-14).

Nordberg (2017) explored students’ attitudes towards reading and how they differed between a group of Swedish students in 2000 and another in 2012. In both groups, there was a generally positive attitude towards reading fiction and they expressed the ability to identify themselves through the plot of the novels. The latter group of students was more subject-centred and needed a personal connection to the novel that they read to enjoy it. This presents itself in stark contrast to the year-2000 group, who could distance themselves from the novels that they read to experience an objective point of view while still experiencing enjoyment (pp. 239-240).

² ‘Pleasure reading’ will be used as a loose translation in this thesis as it is the closest English term equivalent to ‘nöjesläsning’.

This shows the progressive change in students' attitudes towards reading fiction over the duration of ten years. To encourage students to read fiction, Lazar (1993) recommends teachers to select literature which is directly connected to areas of significant interest to students (p. 41). In doing so, the students will be granted the opportunity to create a personal connection that has proven to be essential in order for them to find pleasure within what they read. This personal connection can already be initiated at an early age, as shown in the results of Mullan's (2010) study. The study shows that parents play a crucial role in creating positive attitudes towards reading within their children. Parents who read for at least 30 minutes each day model a habit that their children carry with them in the future (p. 427). One could argue that these habits have the ability to contribute to pleasure reading and positive attitudes in the classroom.

Students' attitudes towards fiction are connected to their motivation to read. According to Kulturrådet (2015) and Karlsson (2015), it is possible to have a positive attitude towards reading and at the same time have a meagre amount of motivation since they are not directly linked to each other. Two different kinds of motivation mentioned in both studies are extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is used to describe how an individual is motivated to perform a task that is inherently enjoyable to them. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is used to describe a sense of motivation that relies on outside influences and/or rewards. For example, when a teacher asks their students to complete a task for a specific due date, that will affect the students' extrinsic motivation (Kulturrådet, 2015, pp. 24-25; Karlsson, 2015, p. 8). A further extrinsic motivational factor that could negatively affect students' motivation in connection to reading is the previously mentioned aspect of time. Karlsson (2015) explains that her interviewed teachers experienced that their students' motivation to read was directly affected by the limited amount of time allocated for them to do so at school (p. 43). For example, the time constraint of a typical 60-minute lesson could affect the students' motivation and their will to read. Furthermore, Karlsson (2015) and Stagovala (2006) elucidate how students can

express a lack of motivation towards teachers' literature instruction when there is something that does not interest them or does not feel as relevant as possible (Karlsson, 2015, p. 53; Stagovala, 2006, p. 14). Additionally, Karlsson (2015) suggests involving the students in the teaching by creating joint discussions about fiction and specific novels, between students and the teacher. Moreover, bringing up individual students' ideas and their interests in class is a way of increasing the students' intrinsic motivation (pp. 53-54). To further raise the students' motivation in connection to reading fiction, Stagovala (2006) asserts that teachers need to think carefully about the level of texts and books to use in their literature instruction. If the novel is too difficult for the students to understand, the student will not find pleasure in reading and will become unmotivated. Nonetheless, if teachers find a text appropriate for the students' level of reading comprehension abilities, the students will become motivated enough to begin to read (p. 16).

Finding fiction appropriate for students' reading comprehension levels can, however, be difficult to do. The Institute for Academic Excellence (1998) describes Vygotsky's ZPD, or Zone of Proximal Development, as a method of determining students' abilities and knowledge levels. Furthermore, when one, as a teacher, is working according to the ZPD, one is interested in making it challenging for the students yet within the range of their abilities. The Institute for Academic Excellence (1998) provides established guidelines about the ZPD. For example, these can be used by teachers as a tool to estimate which novels can be suitable for their students concerning their level of reading ability. It is of importance to use the guidelines for that sole purpose, because if not, students risk feeling distressed, demotivated, and understimulated due to a lack of challenges. According to the Institute for Academic Excellence (1998), many factors affect the choices of novels in relation to the different students' varying ZPDs. The attitudes of classmates, parents, and teachers might positively affect the students and their motivation to read. In fact, the students' attitudes towards reading affect their ZPD, as some students want

challenges while some students do not (pp. 1-2). Teachers need to have a range of different books available for their students to choose from, and “it is critical to have books available that match the interests and reading levels of individual students. If the school doesn't have a wide range of accessible books, the ZPD level cannot be set as high” (The Institute for Academic Excellence, 1998, p. 2). It is also important for teachers to be able to find appropriate novels that suit each student's ZPD. Teachers need to consider these factors when teaching fiction, as it is their responsibility to use their judgement to locate their students' individual ZPD. If the guidelines were to be used, it could benefit the students' reading comprehension abilities and their motivation to read literature (The Institute for Academic Excellence, 1998, pp. 2-3).

Reading Strategies

Teachers need to actively work with reading strategies when teaching their students so that they have the tools needed to comprehend the text at hand (Norrman, 2016, pp. 6, 10). One such example of a reading strategy is reader-response theory, which considers the individual to naturally be in possession of the tools of literature comprehension.

Reader-response theory rose to popularity in the 1960s, and Rosenblatt (1993), who was one of many who studied and popularised it, describes it as a way to explain how readers can draw on their pre-existing knowledge and previous experiences of life and language to create understanding when reading texts and literature (p. 381). Inan and Boldan (2018) explain that readers are considered to be active participants who use these previous experiences as part of a meaning-making process that allows multiple interpretations of literary texts (p. 64). This could help students see how their knowledge and analysis of a text can stem from their own experiences, and not something intangible and foreign. In a classroom setting, this means that the groups' production of knowledge centres on the experience of reading a literary text and how their backgrounds interplay with it (Inan & Boldan, 2018, pp. 64, 67).

As mentioned above, reader-response theory focuses on the reader's knowledge, interests, and experiences, and how they affect the reader's attitude towards the text. Reissman (1994) exemplifies the use of reader-response theory in an article in which she described how she used this to promote reading to a multicultural ESL class. For example, one text given to the students was an excerpt from the beginning of *The Joy Luck Club*, which deals with the topic of immigration to America and the American Dream, seen through the eyes of an old woman (p. 20). This passage contains language and mentions of geographical locations that are Chinese-specific, but Reissman (1994) opted to omit these parts and see how her students reacted to the text (p. 23). Several students expressed that they felt that the characters were familiar, with one student stating that they were reminded of their grandmother in Cuba and another of their Korean family members (p. 21). Reissman (1994) concludes that she would most likely use this method in future lessons because it proved to be a successful tool for engaging and motivating students. By having omitted cultural details from this passage, her students were able to experience first-hand how their own cultures and values became relevant when interpreting what they read (p. 23).

However, when using reading strategies with students, Norrman (2016) explains the risk of presuming their pre-existing knowledge, especially when teaching them English as a second language. As an English teacher in Sweden, one might assume that students will have previously worked with reading strategies in their Swedish classes, and therefore should be prepared to apply these strategies in their English classes. However, it is crucial to work with reading strategies with one's students when teaching an L2 (p. 6). Norrman (2016) explains that "strategies such as predicting and activating prior knowledge should be used *before* reading to get students ready to read. *During* reading they should use the strategies to help them focus, and *after* reading they should check for comprehension" (p. 8). Hong-Nam (2014) presents the ideas of Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Hampson, and Echevarria (1998) by stressing the

importance of teaching reading strategies by explaining that simply reading texts or additional texts does not increase students' reading comprehension (p. 3). This is further elaborated on in Lipka and Siegel's (2011) study where they declare that the ability to read word for word does not equate to actual reading comprehension (p. 1889).

Hong-Nam (2014) proposes that for students to improve their reading comprehension, they must apply reading strategies to the text given to them. In fact, in one study mentioned in this article, students with advanced reading skills were found to use more reading strategies than those with poor reading skills (p. 3). Teachers should teach their students about different reading strategies by actively showing them how to use them, such as reading aloud or searching for clues in a text. In doing so, the teacher would be using a method called modelling, which shows the students what is expected of them, along with how they should work on a task in a practical sense (Norrman, 2016, p. 9). Norrman (2016) explains that modelling is essential when a teacher introduces a text to a class, since students have a tendency to try to read through their material as quickly as possible, thus missing out on important clues and information. In this scenario, the teacher can call on students to first read the title, look at the images, and even skim through the index to see what information they can gather from solely reading the subtitles. This shows the students how to search for information and how to form predictions before engaging with a text (p. 9).

Connection to Teaching Practices and Skolverket's Requirements

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, modelling is a vital part of teaching students how to perform a task. Fiction can function in a similar manner in the sense that the characters and communities found in novels and short stories model the behaviours found in our society. This research project focuses specifically on the promotion of reading fiction in the form of narrative prose, and the reasons for that will be presented shortly. Oatley (2011) explains, in conjunction

with his chapter about the Social-Improvement Hypothesis, that reading fiction is supposedly good for the individual because it allows them to practice projecting themselves into the minds of others. Moreover, it allows the individual to sympathise, empathise, and understand the world from the characters' points of view (p. 43).

The emphasis given to the importance of understanding how students react, both negatively and positively, to fictional texts, falls in line with Skolverket's (2011) aims and requirements. In all three levels of English taught at upper-secondary school, teaching is required to cover fiction, both contemporary and classic (p. 3, 7, 11). As mentioned above in Oatley's (2011) statement about reading fiction, fiction allows the individual to explore how characters think and how their society is constructed (p. 43). In a parallel fashion, Skolverket (2013) requires the Swedish school to place value on democracy, the "inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between people" (p. 4). Furthermore, students' knowledge and progress rely on granting them the opportunity to see inter-connections in what they study. Students must also be allowed to explore different perspectives, gain insight into the layout of their education, and see how different areas of knowledge interplay. However, students should not only make explicit connections between what they read and how their society is built (Skolverket, 2013, pp. 6, 11) but also be allowed to learn how to turn to fiction and nonfiction "as a source of knowledge, insight and pleasure" (Skolverket, 2013, p. 8). Students should also be given the power to affect their education and make choices about the contents of their courses (Skolverket, 2013, p. 11). In doing so, students could potentially develop the ability to read for pleasure. Nevertheless, as indicated when problematising the current reading situation among upper-secondary school students, pleasure-reading is a rare phenomenon. With a foundation built upon theories and previous research in this field of studies, an anchor in Skolverket's requirements, and data collected through interviews conducted with teachers who have practical

experience in this area, this research project aims to explore strategies that can be applied to teaching English fiction to upper-secondary-school students in Sweden.

Methodology

Nordberg (2014) problematises the fact that the public debate relies on quantitative results, such as the PISA results, when discussing students' faltering literary competence (p. 4). Christoffersen and Johannessen (2015) state that qualitative methods are concerned with understanding human behaviour and make use of a subjective stance to collect data that represents an insider perspective (p. 83). In line with this, qualitative methods of research in this field could better allow the expression of opinions on students' attitudes towards reading and fiction. Therefore, a qualitative method of data collection was chosen for this research project. This study used elicitation techniques in the form of seven semi-structured interviews, which, according to Nunan (1992), is a beneficial method when gathering interviewees' experiences (pp. 136, 150). These interviews were conducted with seven teachers from several different schools in Skåne.

Data Collection Procedures

As previously stated, qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen for the data collection. Christoffersen and Johannessen (2015) propose that when conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews, researchers should place emphasis on engaging in open and comfortable conversation with their interviewees (p. 83), thus making the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews the selected method of data collection. The interviews in this study aimed to explore teachers' experiences of teaching fiction, and which possible problems have occurred when teaching fiction. Moreover, the interviews also intend to investigate how the teachers' literature instruction is affected by their students' motivation and attitudes towards fiction. When

researching teachers' teaching experiences, it is argued by Christoffersen and Johannessen (2015) that it is favourable to use interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their thoughts, since the interviewee has the opportunity to develop their answers throughout the conversation. The choice of using semi-structured interviews was made since the interviewer could have a larger amount of flexibility when conducting them, such as the ability to pose follow-up questions. This also enabled the interviews to become more of a conversation than an interrogation, in contrast to structured interviews (pp. 83, 85-86). Taking into consideration the factors above, an interview guide, seen in Appendix D, was created for the semi-structured interviews with topics and some connected questions for each topic as a help for the interviewers to know where to begin during the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded via one mobile phone and one computer, and since this study made use of content analysis, the transcription of utterances such as 'uhm' was deemed unnecessary. Had this study made use of a discourse analysis, all aspects of speech would have been transcribed and seen as important. To keep the anonymity of the participating interviewees, their names were removed and exchanged for Anna, Birgitta, Gavin, Helen, Ted, Viveka, and William.

To find the interviewees for this study, the researchers contacted their previous VFU supervisors and asked if they would be able to participate. If the supervisors were not certified English teachers, they would put the researchers in contact with those who were. The participants were selected with the help of Christoffersen and Johannessen's (2015) criteria-based selection (p. 56). The criteria for the participants were that they had to be certified English teachers, upper-secondary teachers, and individuals who have experiences of including fiction modules in their teaching.

Ethical Principles Regarding Research

As stated in the previous section, the anonymity of one's interviewees is a factor to be mindful of while conducting research. Vetenskapsrådet (2002) presents the requirements of confidentiality as a guideline for researchers to use while administering personal information. Since it is of importance that participants' personal information is kept hidden and unidentifiable (p. 12), the researchers chose to replace the interviewees' real names with fake ones. These new names reflected gender to show diversity in the results, but they did not disclose any information about the participants' ethnicity or their mother tongue.

According to the requirements of information outlined by Vetenskapsrådet (2002), the researchers needed to inform their participants about their project and the conditions for their participation in the study. The interviewees for this project were informed about the project and its goal via e-mail beforehand without presenting too much information which could affect and interfere with their answers during the interviews. The interviewees were further informed about the project through a consent document presented to them before the interview took place. They were invited to sign the document, and, by doing so, agreed to participate in the study according to the presented terms and conditions. The document of consent, seen in Appendix C, also ensured that the participants were made aware of their right to interrupt their participation in the study at any time, and that if they chose to withdraw they would not be subjected to external pressure to complete their participation in the interview and data collection process. Finally, the last step required to guarantee an established ethical approach to the data collection process was to make known that the collected material was to be used for research purposes only (pp. 7-11, 14). To ensure that this was carried out, the recordings of the interviews were kept in an external hard-drive during the research project, as well as the transcribed

versions of the interviews. The collected data are to be destroyed after the approval of this thesis.

Analysing Data Through the Use of a Content-Analysis Table

The first steps in this process were the week-long process of transcribing the interviews and the creation of seven separate content-analysis tables. An example of a content-analysis table can be seen in Appendix A. According to Weber (1990), content analysis is beneficial when making qualitative inferences as it can show trends in the content of transcripts of “human communications” (p. 2). This research project made use of a content analysis table to compare and contrast interviewees’ answers in conjunction with the previous research and theoretical framework. This form of analysis was chosen in connection with Nunan’s (1992) definition of external reliability, in which he refers to the extent to which an independent researcher could process the same data, with the same method, and yield the same (or similar) results (p. 14). The replicability of a content-analysis table establishes external reliability in this research project. Each table contained several rows for different categories and two columns. The left column was dedicated to separating the table into different colour-coded categories about the different areas used in this study’s research background and theoretical framework. For example, the research background was split up into rows of topics such as ‘examples of literature instruction’ and ‘students’ attitudes towards reading’, and there was one row dedicated to ‘the Matthew effect’. The column to the right was used to categorising the interviewee’s responses in accordance with the areas on the left side of the table. This column and its rows contained excerpts of the transcribed interviews that were relevant to the different categories within the research background and theoretical framework. Each table was labelled with made-up names to maintain anonymity. In short, the excerpts were compared to the aforementioned relevant parts of the foundation of this study in order to structure the upcoming

analysis and discussion. Once this table was assembled, it served as a skeleton for how the analysis would be structured and presented in writing.

Validity and Reliability

So as to ensure construct validity, the interviewees participated in interviews that were grounded in, and asked questions that were relevant to, the aim of the study at hand. Put simply, they were asked questions about their students' reading habits and which strategies they employed in their class(es). Furthermore, construct validity was established in this study by defining the investigated constructs in such a way that the results become accessible to the reader of this paper. The questions asked in the interviews were designed to neither lead, or mislead, participants' answers, nor investigate areas without relevance to the aim at hand. External reliability was ensured by analysing the collected data from the interview in juxtaposition with the research background and theoretical framework, so that an outside researcher would be able to come to the same conclusion upon a reanalysis of the data and by reconducting the study (Nunan, 1992, pp. 14-17).

Results and Analysis

The analysis of this study consists of one entire discussion part with sub-categories related to different topics from the conducted interviews. A table, found in Appendix B, was created to give a visual overview of the literature used in different grades by different teachers in their respective literature units. Each subcategory in this section contains these examples of literature, along with the interviewees' experience of using them in the classroom, and they are continuously presented in connection with the Matthew effect and the previous research used in this study.

Is There a Decline in Students' Reading Habits?

The OECD (2016) has indicated the existence of a negative trend in students' reading habits since the early 2000s (p. 1) but states that Sweden is starting to show its first signs of improvement after the 2015 PISA results. In fact, the 2018 results describe Sweden's performance as "returning to a level similar to that observed in the early PISA assessments" (OECD, 2019, p. 3). Although this seems to be changing for the better, both the OECD (2016) and Skolverket (2019) acknowledge the presence of a growing gap between weak and strong readers in Swedish schools (p. 1; pp. 16-17). However, based on the answers given by certain interviewees, one does not have to exclude the other; there seems to both be a gap between levels of reading proficiency and a continuous decline in reading habits. Birgitta explained that she has seen a change in students' reading habits throughout her 30 years of teaching, and that "the book is not central any longer, [...] lots of students come in and say 'can I listen to this instead' or [...] 'I don't like reading, I don't read very much'". One of Birgitta's approaches to this is to talk to her students about the importance of novels and developing reading habits. Gavin and Ted stated that they have many students who enter upper-secondary school without ever having read an entire book. Gavin further discussed that it is not only the English subject which is affected by the students' lacking reading habits, "it's really clear in every subject, they don't read, they find it incredibly difficult, and it's not just Swedish-as-a-second-language students, it's all students".

As presented above, there were shared experiences regarding the decline in students' reading habits. The interviewed teachers seemed to believe that students generally do not have well-functioning reading habits, which affect their results on reading comprehension tests. Gavin explained that the school he works for had conducted a reading comprehension test in Swedish, and "found that a vast majority of the school is reading four or five grade levels below where they should be. [...] [The teachers] assume it spills over to English as well". In other

words, the issue of students not possessing reading habits can potentially have negative effects on their reading comprehension levels.

Different Levels of Reading Proficiency

Despite the teachers' witnessing of students' decline in reading proficiency, according to Viveka, there were some students in each class who read regularly. A shared view amongst the interviewed teachers was that they found varying levels of reading comprehension within their classes, which affected their literature instruction. For instance, Gavin stated: "I have students which I give a book to on Monday, and on Friday they're done. [...] Then there are other students who, they've never read a book, ever, cover to cover, the idea of doing it is insurmountable". Anna acknowledged that some of her students "walk around carrying books. [...] I have one student, in particular, who actually admitted he hasn't read an entire novel, so there are students who don't read at all and there are students who read [a lot]". Stanovich (1986) explains that large differences in reading proficiency among students can be illustrated through the use of the Matthew effect (p. 382). The previous examples of the students' behaviour (e.g. carrying books or admitting to never having read a book) provide a representation of what this disparity could look like in a school setting. Taube (2007) describes weak readers to be stuck in a vicious cycle in which they do not find the confidence to believe that they will succeed. It is also often the case that teachers continuously expect these kinds of results from the weaker students which also contributes to their negative self-image (pp. 90-91). This was apparent in Gavin's interview in which he explained the problem as follows: "A lot of students have already learned to fail, 'I can't do this, it's not worth trying, not doing it is better than failing at doing it'".

As written above, Stanovich (1986) uses the Matthew effect to describe how weak readers become worse (p. 382). In reality, one could argue that if the students are left unattended, and

without support, their reading proficiency would plateau. However, since school becomes more strenuous and requires more of the students with each passing year, one could regard the weaker students as becoming worse because the rift between the students' level of reading proficiency and the requirements of Skolverket enlarges. Anna commented that "[...] it is a bit too late to actually teach them to sit down and read" in upper-secondary school, and William added that there are "[...] too few books in school to give those who are not already [proficient readers] enough stimulus". The Institute for Academic Excellence (1998) emphasises the importance of the availability of and states that it is vital for the teachers to have a scope of novels to choose from to reach each student's level of ZPD. For the students to optimally develop in accordance with their ZPD, they must be allowed to choose or be given novels suitable for their proficiency level and their interests (p. 2).

Why Have Students' Reading Habits Changed and Why Have Some Students Fallen

Behind?

To explain the change in students' reading habits and the difference between students' reading proficiency levels, the role of technology and students' parents will be discussed in this section. William argued that "some students [...] clearly have [...] an upbringing where they have had books around them, Swedish and English, and that shows". An example of this was:

I have [...] one student in the first year, and it's obvious that she has been reading a lot at home and I think that if the parents don't read, then I think it's difficult for the child to start and [...] be that interested.

Birgitta and Ted shared a similar point of view by stating that students who have parents that read at home are already used to the idea of discussing literature. Birgitta further added that as a parent "you encourage your children to read if you read yourself". This can be connected to Mullan's (2010) idea of modelled behaviour; if children are habitually read to them from an

early age, it can benefit them by creating a positive mindset towards literature (p. 427). However, Gavin presented a different type of problem, which is that when students begin upper-secondary school, they are 16 years old. He explained that:

[...] I think it needs to probably be tackled at a much younger age, I know the UK has had quite successful projects working on educating parents on how to read with children. [...] But it's too late by the age we get them. By 16, those habits are formed, the chance to repair that is actually quite low. We can do what we can but we're never going to be able to compensate for 16 years.

Despite the fact that 16 years of reading habits have been lost, teachers can also model the previously described behaviours in their classrooms and schools. For example, in Helen's school, her colleague created a reading list with books that teachers at the school are currently reading. The reading list changes every month, and, according to Helen, it has proven to have had positive effects on the students in the sense that they become inspired and tend to discuss books more often with their teachers than before. Gavin similarly replicates the behaviour of reading by doing so in front of his students as they read their own books. The novels are not work-related, and it is a way to show students that teachers enjoy reading in their spare time.

When discussing the differences in students' reading habits, the interviewees shared interesting views on why they believed they had changed, and why some students keep falling behind. Anna, Gavin, Viveka, and William concluded that technology and social media are largely to blame. According to these teachers, reading is a changing habit due to social media and the implications of fast media-consumption. As previously indicated by Vladut (2017), students spend more time on social media than on reading literature since they perceive it to be more stimulating and beneficial to them, in contrast to what they experience when reading fiction (p. 20). Since they are used to receiving information quickly through different types of media platforms, Anna, Viveka, and William have observed that their students seem to have an

inability to focus for a long period of time. According to Papadima-Sophocleous (2009), this could affect the students' ability to read fiction since they need to be active and alert during this process to be able to obtain joy from it (p. 119). William emphasises that it is also more difficult to derive the same amount of excitement from a novel as they do from "TV [and] video games. [...] A lot of students give up because it's not as quick. [...] If you would watch a movie and after an hour it's already very exciting and gripping". Technology's effects on students' reading habits challenge teachers and their teaching of fiction and need to be taken into account when creating literature units. This will potentially allow the teachers to better understand their students' current reading habits and how they affect their attitudes and motivation towards reading.

Literature Instruction and the Effects of Students' Attitudes and Motivation

In the previous section, there was a discussion of a change in students' reading habits and the reasons for it. The analysis now proceeds to an introduction to the interviewed teachers' literature units and a discussion about how they are affected by students' attitudes towards fiction along with their levels of motivation.

Behind the Scenes of Literature Units

Students' attitudes and motivation towards reading seemed to be correlated to how some of these teachers have chosen to construct their literature units. This following section will take a gander at the construction of such units, and what these teachers keep in mind when using certain literary texts in their teaching. As seen in the table included in Appendix B, the literature and genres used by the interviewees resemble Skolverket's (2011) requirements in the syllabus for English 5, 6, and 7. English 5 should focus on "literature and other fiction" (p. 3), English 6 should include "contemporary and older literature" (p. 7), and English 7 should contain

“contemporary and older literature and other fiction in various genres such as drama” (p. 11). Nevertheless, as mentioned in the table, some teachers said that they avoid choosing what students should read, and instead prefer to leave the selection of novels up to them while still maintaining a close bond with the aforementioned requirements. However, others mentioned that they were partial to choosing literature for their students instead.

Birgitta, Gavin, and Ted occasionally gave their students the freedom to choose their own literary texts. They encouraged their students to choose literary texts based on their interests; moreover, they argued that their students displayed better attitudes when given the freedom of choosing the material for the literature units themselves. Cho and Krashen (2016) similarly emphasise how beneficial it is for students to select their novels in accordance to their interests to become proficient readers (p. 7). Additionally, Skolverket (2013) stresses how important it is for teachers to allow their students to participate in affecting their education (p. 11). In other words, allowing one’s students to engage in the selection of novels in class can be seen as a beneficial method of including them in choices regarding their education.

When discussing how they chose what their students should read, Anna and Viveka seemed to use similar methods of selection. For example, Anna takes into account her first-year upper-secondary students’ field of study when teaching *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. This novel takes place in Mississippi during the 1950s and tells the true tale of the abduction and murder of Emmett Till, an African-American teenager. According to Anna, most of her students are enrolled in the economy programme, with a specific focus on law, but have never heard of the Civil Rights Movement. Using this work of fiction allows the students to explore a familiar arena while simultaneously learning about events that continue being of relevance today. As stated by Karlsson (2015) and Stagovala (2006), a lack of relevancy when teaching literature risks leading to demotivation within students (p. 53; p. 14). Students need to be granted the opportunity to freely interpret what they read, but they also deserve a foundation of knowledge from which

their responses and opinions can stem (Lazar, 1993, pp. 41, 43). Viveka reported steering her literature units towards her social science students, whose programme focuses on behavioural sciences. However, rather than choosing a novel, Viveka said she often makes use of Stephen King's short stories due to how interesting his portraits of characters are, and they can serve as conversation starters about how people are not good *or* evil, but good *and* evil. Despite having found literature that is well-adapted to the students' programme. Viveka acknowledged that, if possible, she would like to solely teach how to read for pleasure, since students might need a break from having every aspect of their education tailored to their line of study. One of the perks of selecting novels for students to read is that it allows for them to partake in discussions within the same topic.

How Do the Interviewed Teachers' Students Express Their Attitudes Towards Reading?

As indicated in the title, this section of the analysis should be read as a compilation of the interviewed teachers' observations of their students' attitudes towards reading. In other words, it is a discussion of their experiences, and the interpretations in this part are not supported by the sources in the previous research of this thesis.

In Gavin and Ted's experience, negative opinions of reading and schoolwork in class have been expressed by all students in upper-secondary school, regardless of which year they attend. When Gavin introduced his English 7 students to *Romeo and Juliet*, he used the GCSE copy of the play. The initial response to this unit was along the lines of "UUGGHH! Do we have to?", which reinforces the sentiment of 'school sucks' as a status quo. Gavin said that although he was used to this reaction, he has actively worked to diminish it by introducing gang violence as the theme of the play to captivate his students' interest. When he compared *Romeo and Juliet* to gang violence in the real world, students took a step back and their attitude changed. Shakespeare is 'boring', but gang violence is a topic that is 'allowed'. Gavin expressed that he

would have hoped that English 7 students would not have to react that way, but he acknowledged that ‘tricking’ them or creating a thrilling hook, usually draws them in. The students’ interests and attitudes are important because they have dictated how he has decided to introduce literature to the class. Ted recognised these negative attitudes in his own class but mentioned that he prefers that the students openly voice their dislike as it provides him with a conversation starter about literature. He explained that “you know exactly what they think [...] and that’s good. I find it easier when they are brutally honest, like ‘I hate this book!’, [and I say] ‘Well, good! What do you hate about it?’”. He expressed that it is much easier to address a problem when it is brought out into the light as he has a better chance of helping his students when they communicate their feelings to him.

Anna, Birgitta, and Helen have encountered a less forthright form of expression in their classes, as their students have kept their opinions to themselves. Instead, students’ attitudes have seemed to reveal themselves in the form of how they have managed discussions in class, the level of work they have produced, and the comments made outside of the classroom walls. For instance, Helen said that opinions are seldomly expressed in front of other students; however, some students have chosen to seek her out in her office outside of class-time to share their experiences with a text. For instance, one English 7 student was reading *The Great Gatsby* and began to understand the significance of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s use of colours in the story and expressed their delight at being able to understand that. Based on Helen, Anna, and Birgitta’s experiences with quiet groups of students, it would seem that it is difficult to understand how these students feel about their literature units as they tend to keep their opinions to themselves.

Voiced opinions have been appreciated by Gavin and Ted because they have allowed them to angle the literature units towards students’ interests, opinions, and needs. Both teachers recognised that negative attitudes most likely stem from a general dislike of school and school-related activities. However, they could also be appropriate tell-tale signs of the direction in

which the teaching should go. When forming conclusions purely based on the answers from the latter interviews, there seems to be no indication that ‘quiet’ attitudes affect the teachers’ literature instruction. One could argue that it has the potential to affect the mood in the classroom, but it does not seem to affect how these teachers approach teaching literature.

Combatting Students’ Negative Attitudes Towards Reading

A shared experience among the seven interviewed teachers was their observation of students’ negative attitudes and disposition to label school as being ‘boring’, and how their initial reaction to reading is to say that it, too, is ‘boring’. These teachers teach at different schools, with different types of students, in different cities, but the students appeared to share the same general attitude towards school and reading. Viveka accurately summarised this phenomenon by saying:

[...] I think it’s a relationship that they’ve had with school, [...] it was like that when I went to school, too. [...] You know, it’s the same thing with homework, ‘oh homework is boring’, well, depends on what you’re going to do with the homework [...] but homework is boring, that’s the rule, and so is reading, that’s the rule.

Both Anna and Ted had also noticed how these students’ tendencies not to read had turned into somewhat of a bragging contest, with students proudly proclaiming that they had never read a book in their lives, despite being third-year upper-secondary students.

Viveka described a method she turns to when attempting to reverse their negative attitudes towards reading. She did this by creating discussions about the upcoming novels and by placing emphasis on choosing interesting and suitable pieces of literature for her students. Similarly to Viveka’s approach, Gavin allowed his students’ cultural backgrounds to dictate the selection of literature. He gave an example of his English mother-tongue group in which he teaches three West-African students. This led him to choose *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe “because

it's sort of the classic West-African novel". Despite it being a classic, Gavin confessed to not being partial to it. However, he admitted that the process of teaching it was enlightening because the students "got much more out of it than [he] did, which probably says something about the importance of choosing things which are culturally relevant to [them]". This reflection of his exemplifies how a text can become more relevant when teachers makes use of their students' backgrounds and identities when teaching literature. Inan and Boldan (2018) declare that the reader's interpretation is important to the derivation of the meaning of a text (p. 67). One could argue that these students successfully made use of their previous experiences with culture and language to do so with *Things Fall Apart*. In summary, teachers should try to contradict their students' notion of 'school is boring' to change their attitudes towards fiction and making use of students' identities and interests seems to be a part of this process.

Reading for Assessments and Grades

There seems to be a perpetual struggle with regards to introducing reading to students as something pleasurable. In some of these teachers' cases, the sole motivator for many students is the grades. Birgitta begrudgingly admitted to making use of this motivator as it is a prevalent attitude at her school:

Sometimes I also say, which I hate myself for saying, that [reading] is good in order to get a good grade because you need to [...] [get good grades on] your national tests [...]. So that is something that they, unfortunately, listen to more, [rather] than that they could learn lots from reading.

However, she acknowledged that the students are high-achievers and they have been proven to respond well when engaging with reading as a goal or grade-oriented task. When selecting what to read, these students have tried to pick the largest and most challenging book they could find. In these kinds of cases, The Institute for Academic Excellence (1998) explains how important

it is for teachers to support their students in the selection of novels and to find the appropriate amount of challenge in accordance to their ZPD level. Students should be able to select a demanding text, but not an incomprehensible one (p. 2). Gavin's line of thought concurred by saying that teachers need to "challenge them [...] [and] to force them [...] to do things they're uncomfortable with so they can learn those skills. But it has to be done in a way that doesn't cause them to switch off". In summary, even though Birgitta's students might have the tools and the ambition required to take on challenging literary works, they still require the proper support so that they can choose an appropriate novel.

To touch back upon grade-oriented motivation, William explained that several of his students have shown a similar inclination to complete reading tasks because it is demanded of them and because they need to achieve certain grades. However, some of these students expressed to him that the reading became easier once they got into the novel, which made them more motivated towards the end. For example, one group of students, who were often difficult to motivate, showed a significant interest in racism in the United States, which led William to choose John Grisham's *A Time To Kill*. This novel deals with racial violence in the Southern States and it sparked an interest within the students. This positive reaction to the novel confirms Lazar's (1993) statement about how important it is for teachers to make use of their students' interests when choosing what to read (p. 41).

However, even though paying attention to students' interests has proven to yield positive results, it is not always enough. William mentioned that time is also an important factor to take into consideration when planning his literature units, for instance:

When you have an assignment which spans over a long time, even if you divide it into different segments [...] in the beginning they say, 'Hah, that's a lot of time' and at the end, they're like 'Can we have more time?'

This is not necessarily a low level of reading proficiency, but rather an issue with time management. Viveka neatly summarised this phenomenon by stating that her students were not against reading, they were against the time it took to do so. The time it takes to read is one of the main hurdles for students, because, as Gavin explained, “it feels very passive to them, they don’t feel like they’re doing anything”. These students exist in a society that demands quick thinking and is built upon instant gratification, and Papadima-Sophocleous (2009) gives reason for their unwillingness to read by stating that the notion of spending time on a book to seek enjoyment can be foreign to them (p. 119). This could also explain their procrastination and the effort they seem to need when completing a reading assignment.

One of the largest shared challenges faced among these teachers is the ability to teach literature and motivate students to read: the ability to create pleasure readers. Academic challenges are often related to performance or difficult written tasks, but in this instance, the challenge is to make students spend time reading.

The Importance of Reading and of Reading for Pleasure

According to Oatley (2011) and his Social-Improvement Hypothesis, reading fiction is supposedly good for the individual. This is because it allows them to practice sympathy, empathy, and perspective-taking in literature (p. 43), which can in turn be applied to encounters in the real world. Skolverket (2013) requires students to be able to “empathise with and understand the situation of other people, and develop a willingness to act with their best interests at heart” (p. 10). Additionally, Gavin explained how “as English teachers, we know that if you read, you’ll have a better vocabulary, your grammar will get better, everything will just get better”. However, it is not always easy to convince students to read for these reasons. Nevertheless, when teaching literature by motivating students with grades and merit points, or angling the unit towards the students’ programme, one also risks making the reading process

somewhat task orientated. As Viveka put it, “sometimes they don’t want more social sciences. And I think maybe literature shouldn’t necessarily be taught for a cause [...]. It can be motivating, but [it’s also] making it instrumental. It’s schoolwork rather than literature”. As the interviewed teachers have expressed thus far, their students seem to need to feel that what they do in school is beneficial to their lives.

Since students can at times be unwilling to connect each unit they do with their line of study, an important first step to introducing students to pleasure reading is to ensure that they feel it engages their interests. To quote Gavin: “I try to find things that they’ll enjoy reading because we’re never going to make readers if reading is always difficult. It needs to be enjoyable; it needs to be fun”. One way of potentially making this process enjoyable is to activate prior knowledge before reading (Norrman, 2016, p. 8). Karlsson (2015) and Stagovala (2006) support the necessity of making the literature instruction interesting and relevant to one’s students in order to avoid a lack of motivation (p. 53; p. 14). In other words, the combination of activating the students’ prior knowledge and sparking interest and relevance for the students can create a foundation when reading. In Gavin’s English 7 class, students came face to face with the GCSE copy of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. He mentioned that there were huge differences between students who read for pleasure in this class and students who dreaded the thought of reading half a page. Ted stressed the importance of throwing a hook and awakening their interest; “if it’s something that doesn’t wake their interest then they are not going to read it”. When throwing a hook, Anna built a foundation of knowledge to establish connections to historical events, such as the Civil Rights Movement in *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. Despite the disparity between these levels and the fact that these units have graded assessments, joy, preparation, and a good sales pitch become key when teaching. In the interview, Gavin sympathised with his students, stating that he, too, disliked reading as a child but was forced to do it. He loves it today but recognised that reading for pleasure should not be forced, or

something you just have to get through. When he has planned his English 5 literature units, the students have had the entire fall term to finish reading their book(s). This benefits strong readers who will have the opportunity to read several books, and the “students who are slower readers, or who need much more support reading, have the time and don’t feel hurried”. The support and the time given to the students are aspects that are also included in Stanovich’s (1986) mention of the ‘organism-environment’ correlation. A strong reader is often found in an environment that is conducive to further growth in reading (p. 382), whereas a weak reader is trapped in a vicious cycle and an environment that slows down their progress (Taube, 2007, p. 90). One could argue that Gavin works against the Matthew effect by providing the same support for all of his students and does not discriminate between their different levels of reading proficiency. In conclusion, the weak readers are benefited by the time allocated to them to finish reading, and strong students have time to seek out more books and develop their existing reading habits. Gavin expressed that this has yielded positive results and has improved the overall attitudes towards reading. As he phrased it: “I generally find that those who’ve said, ‘I’ve never read a book’ actually, towards the end, say ‘I actually, I did, I could do this, this was okay’”. In the end, the students felt as if they have been doing something productive when reading, and when working on their reading unit. According to Gavin, his students have expressed that it is worth doing since it feels as if it is going to go somewhere.

In summary, pleasure reading has proven to be a dynamic phenomenon because there are different ways to get there. When talking to Anna, Gavin, and Ted, stricter guidelines and a narrow selection of literary texts can generate positive results in students’ reading habits. Gavin shared an example of this positive outcome by stating that students had begun approaching him in the hallway at school, telling him that they had finished reading and would like permission to select a new book to read. In Helen’s case, her students who are usually quite silent in class showed their enthusiasm by either going to her office to talk after class or by trying to convince

their classmates to read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, due to their positive experience with Orwell's novel.

Strategies and Support while Working with Fiction

The types of support and strategies provided by teachers often rely on the type of literature they choose to teach, and the students they have in their classes. This research project focuses on reading fiction, and the interviewed teachers reported using novels, short stories, excerpts of the aforementioned, and other forms of prose within fiction, depending on what goals they have for their students. Anna found it difficult to use literature when trying to teach students how to become better at reading. She was partial to choosing a more condensed form of literature such as short extracts accompanied by questions, activities, and language work. However, in contrast to Anna's method of teaching literature, William argued that using excerpts required a considerable amount of preparatory work:

An aspect of not having an entire book is [...] [that] you really have to do a thorough and a good job when it comes to explaining the situation and where it's set in time and [...] [its] geographical location. So that they really understand what they are dealing with.

As mentioned above and in accordance with Lazar's (1993) study, students are not always well-acquainted with literature, or reading in general, and in those cases, it is crucial to give them enough background information before they begin to read (p. 43). This can function as a strategy to involve them, and to make them feel that what they are working with is of relevance to them.

Activating prior knowledge is a strategy shared and used by not only William, but Viveka and Ted as well, as they make sure to give students literature-related work and questions before, during, and after their reading process. This method of preparation goes against reader-response theory's centring around students' own interpretations of texts, but after having conducted the

interviews with these teachers, it became clear that several students could need this in order to make sense of what they read. If they lack the habit of reading, or if they are unfamiliar with a topic, they are less likely to respond to a text and derive meaning from it. Furthermore, Norrman (2016) claims that activating the students before reading prepares them for the text at hand. Providing them with strategies during reading guides and helps them focus and using reading comprehension activities afterwards helps them go over what they have just read and checks their understanding (p. 8).

An example of how to provide support during the reading process can be seen in the types of books that Gavin provided his students with. His lower and higher-level students received similar support when reading in the form of books that contain vocabulary support, reading questions, and passages breaking down different scenes. For instance, lower level readers were often given books with vocabulary-building exercises, and high-level readers received books such as the GCSE copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, which provided them with questions and activities that supported their reading and understanding of the content. He also helped his students navigate through texts by deconstructing them. He then asked his students to point out the significance of pictures, titles, and how to quickly find information in a text. These similar methods of support and strategies may bridge the gap between these two groups of readers because they are each given reading material adapted to their needs, but that still presents somewhat of a challenge. According to Taube's (2007) discussion of positive cycles within the Matthew Effect, this type of support can encourage students to read challenging material. The questions included in the literary texts given to Gavin's students could also improve their ability to decode words and expand their vocabulary (p. 92). This could eventually give them proof of their achievements and motivate them to continue engaging with literature. Viveka explained that timelines can also be used as a support during students' reading process as it allows them to simplify the story and retell its main points.

Since students might not always take an interest in literature units or might have difficulties getting started with their reading, one method of supporting them is by reading aloud in class. Although reading aloud is commonly associated with early childhood education, Norrman (2016) explains that teaching reading strategies, such as reading aloud, can aid students' understanding, or performance of a task (p. 9). Ted described this as the initial process of getting his upper-secondary-school students into a book and explained that it was better to just let them sit there and listen. He said that this was particularly beneficial for the students who were not used to reading as they seemed to like it. As mentioned previously in the section about students' reading habits, Gavin modelled reading behaviours to his students by reading his own books and partaking in quiet-reading time with them.

Finally, quiet-reading or reading in class is another strategy used by Helen, Anna, and Viveka, as it supposedly made their students unwind. They understood that they have an hour allocated to them here and there in which they do not have to think about reading at home and can do so in a quiet environment at school. Helen and William also mentioned the use of audiobooks for students with dyslexia, but even for those without, as it could benefit students who need support when engaging with a literary text. In conclusion, as expressed in Hong-Nam's (2014) study and the ideas of Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Hampson, and Echevarria (1998), all of the aforementioned reading strategies contribute to students' reading comprehension, as simply reading texts without support is not enough (p. 2).

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, this study aimed to research how a growing gap between weak and strong readers, along with their attitudes and levels of motivation towards reading, can affect teachers' teaching of fiction to Swedish upper-secondary students. All interviewed teachers experienced teaching a majority of students who enter upper-secondary school without

well-functioning reading habits, which does not mirror the OECD's (2019) reported improvement of Swedish students' reading proficiency (p. 3).

After analysing the interviewed teachers' experiences, it seems that their students' lack of reading habits and the fact that books are no longer central in their lives, directly impacts the students' reading comprehension. Furthermore, this appears to be apparent in every subject and not just in English. The teachers interviewed for this research project also bore witness to significant differences in reading proficiency in the classroom, as there was a noticeable gap between weak and strong readers. A concern shared among several teachers was the fact that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make up for 16 years of poor reading habits. One method used in this situation was modelling, such as reading aloud, which is commonly associated with younger children but appropriate for older ages when showing students how to engage with fiction and reading. This method of teaching supports students who might rely on being able to read in school, and who require an environment that is conducive to their needs; whether they be weak readers who need time or strong readers who need a stimulating environment. Notwithstanding, the students' weak reading habits rarely affected the teachers' selection of literary texts in the classroom, but rather the layout of the literature unit itself, with regards to factors such as the time and support students might need during the process.

In contrast to the effect of the students' reading habits, their manner of expressing attitudes and motivation towards reading seemed to have a more direct impact on the interviewed teachers' selection of fiction. For instance, some of these teachers' students' attitudes were made apparent through openly expressing distaste, which directly reflected their lack of motivation and interest when engaging with literary works. The teachers attempted to combat this negativity by letting their students choose their own novels since they demonstrated better attitudes towards the unit when they were allowed to choose reading material based on their interests and experiences. Other teachers decided to choose appropriate and suitable novels for

their students which were in line with their education or their interests to make them more positive towards reading fiction. These were two different methods of selecting novels for their students, but the decisions were made due to the same reasons: to make the literature units relevant and interesting to their students. Carrying out preparatory work before reading the selected literary work, such as acquainting students with historical backgrounds of texts, helps support students by enabling them to partake in, and contribute to, relevant discussions about different themes in what they read. The need for preparatory work is proven to be necessary for students who require a stronger foundation before forming opinions about a text.

Nevertheless, several of the interviewed teachers also gave examples of teaching methods that closely resembled what some elements of reader-response theory advocates for. They also explained that their incorporation of students' interests and background in their literature units often yielded positive results. Certain aspects of reader-response theory seemed to apply to both the students' individual choices of reading material and the teachers' choices. When choosing their reading material, students were able to start discussions and bring up questions that were birthed in their own experiences and opinions of the text. When teachers chose literary texts, they could tailor the literature units to draw parallels between students' experiences and the text, and potentially made the unit feel more relevant to them and their interests. While it may be difficult to teach students to read for pleasure and some students seem to need a stronger foundation before engaging with literature, the incorporation of some components of reader-response theory into the teaching of fiction seems to be a fruitful step in the right direction.

With regard to what was stated at the beginning of the conclusion, the Matthew effect was initially used to give a possible explanation for the growing gap between weak and strong readers. However, what was revealed was that teachers' active efforts to provide challenges and support to all students, without regard to their level of reading proficiency, was potentially aiding both sides of the spectrum. A point of focus in teachers' literature instruction is on

rebuilding weak readers academic self-confidence, and on challenging strong readers established levels of high performance.

One limitation of this study is that it cannot be generalised to a larger population, such as to all English teachers in Sweden. Instead, it can be regarded as an aid for teachers who feel that the interviewees' experiences apply to their students and workplaces as well. The suggestions for further research within this subject would be to involve more teachers from different locations in Sweden to diversify and generalise the results. Another suggestion could be to include both teachers and students in a similar project which could grant other perspectives, such as collecting students' experiences and opinions about their reading habits, and attitudes and levels of motivation towards reading fiction.

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Appendix A

An Example of a Content-Analysis Table

| Research/Theory | Name: |
|---|-------|
| Reading Discouragement | |
| Students' Motivation in Relation to Reading | |
| Students' Attitudes Towards Reading | |
| Reading Strategies | |
| Reader-Response Theory | |
| Connection to Skolverket | |
| Examples of Literature Instruction | |
| Technology's effect on students | |
| Parents' / Home Life's Effect on Students' | |
| Reading Habits | |
| The Matthew Effect | |

Appendix B

Compilation of Literary Texts from the Interviewees' Literature Units

| Participants | ENG 5 | ENG 6 | ENG 7 | Extra |
|-----------------|--|---|--|-------|
| Anna | - <i>Mississippi Trial, 1955</i> by Chris Crowe | Pick one of the following: - <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> by George Orwell - <i>Americanah</i> by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - <i>The Picture of Dorian Grey</i> by Oscar Wilde - <i>Disgrace</i> by J. M. Coetzee - <i>Half a Yellow Sun</i> by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - <i>The White Tiger</i> by Aravind Adiga | - <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margret Atwood - <i>Disgrace</i> by J. M. Coetzee | n/a |
| Birgitta | Starts with short stories. Then, asks students to | Asks students to pick a classic . | Asks students to pick any book . | n/a |

| | | | | |
|--------------|--|--|---|---|
| | pick any book . | | | |
| Gavin | Goes to the library to help students pick books. | n/a | - <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (GCSE) by William Shakespeare | English mother tongue: <i>Things Fall Apart</i> by Chinua Achebe |
| Helen | - <i>Holes</i> by Louis Sachar | - <i>(Un)arranged Marriage</i> by Bali Rai | Starts with: - <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> by Margret Atwood Sometimes uses: - <i>Americanah</i> by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Asks students to pick one of the following: - <i>Great Expectations</i> by Charles Dickens - <i>Picture of Dorian Grey</i> by Oscar Wilde - <i>To the Lighthouse</i> by Virginia Woolf - <i>Heart of Darkness</i> by | |

| | | | | |
|----------------|---|--|--|--|
| | | | <p>Joseph Conrad</p> <p>- <i>Dracula</i> by Bram Stoker</p> <p>- <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> by Jane Austen</p> <p>- <i>The Great Gatsby</i> by F. Scott Fitzgerald</p> <p>- <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> by Harper Lee</p> <p>- <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> by Daniel Defoe</p> <p>- <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> by George Orwell</p> | |
| Ted | <p>- <i>The Great Gatsby</i> by F. Scott Fitzgerald</p> <p>- <i>The Outsiders</i> by S. E. Hinton</p> | <p>- <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> by George Orwell</p> <p>- <i>Animal Farm</i> by George Orwell</p> | n/a | <p>IM - Language Introduction:</p> <p>No titles mentioned.</p> |
| Viveka | - <i>The Body</i> by Stephen King | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| William | <p>- <i>A Time to Kill</i> by John Grisham</p> <p>- <i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time</i></p> | | n/a | n/a |

| | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| | <i>Indian</i> by Sherman Alexie Asked to select one book from a list of preselected titles. | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|



Appendix C

Consent form

Research title: *“You Can’t Ignore A Book”: How Students’ Reading Habits Affect Teachers’ Literature Instruction*

Researchers: Max Persson and Louise Moreira Hagvall

I have been given information about *“You Can’t Ignore A Book”: How Students’ Reading Habits Affect Teachers’ Literature Instruction* and discussed the research project with Max Persson and Louise Moreira Hagvall who are conducting this research as part of a Master’s thesis supervised by Mette Hildeman Sjölin in the department of Educational Sciences at Lund University.

I understand that participating in this research involves being tape-recorded and the transcribed version of the conducted interview is included in this Master’s thesis, however; my name, the name of my school, and any sensitive information that could point to my ethnicity and/or background is removed, in order to maintain anonymity. I have also had the opportunity to ask Max Persson and Louise Moreira Hagvall any questions I may have about the research and my participation. The final version of this thesis might be published on Lund Student Papers which will make it available to the public.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary. I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from both the interview and the research at any time. My refusal to participate and/or withdrawal of consent will not affect my treatment in any way or my relationship to Lund University.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Max Persson on 07X XXX XX XX, Louise Moreira Hagvall on 07X XXX XX XX or their supervisor Mette Hildeman Sjölin on 07X XXX XX XX. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact Fabian Beijer, the Head of English Studies at Lund University, on 07X XXX XX XX or e-mail fabian.beijer@englund.lu.se.

By signing below, I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

- I allow Max Persson and Louise Moreira Hagvall to use a transcribed version of the interview I participated in.*
- I allow Max Persson and Louise Moreira Hagvall to save the audio file on an external hard drive until the approval of the thesis.*
- I have read and understood the information above, and I agree to participate in this study.*

Participant’s signature

..... Date/...../.....

Participant’s name

.....

Researchers’ signatures

.....

Appendix D

Interview guide:

Intro questions:

- Which levels of English do you teach right now?
- Which levels have you taught?
- How many years have you been teaching?
- Which subjects do you teach?

Opinions - how has reading changed?

- Have you seen a change in students' reading habits over the past decade? Elaborate.
 - *Are there varying levels of reading comprehension/proficiency in your class? Between students?*
- Have these factors affected your literature instruction? If so, how?
 - *Does their pre-existing knowledge and/or cultural background affect your literature instruction and selection of literary texts?*
- Do Skolverket's requirements for literature instruction work for the reading habits of today?

Teaching fiction

- Which types of fiction do you choose to teach in English 5/6/7?
 - *Adapt this question to the teacher being interviewed*
 - *E.g. authors, genres, nationalities*
- Can you give examples of books that you have chosen to teach within this genre, and how have students reacted when you have introduced this literature unit?
 - *Here we can ask the teacher to elaborate where and if needed*
- Can you give an example of an activity you have used in conjunction with [book title]?

Attitudes towards reading fiction

- What is a common reaction seen in class when first introducing a literature unit?
- What kinds of mindsets have you seen in class when teaching fiction?
 - *Why do you think your students have them?*

Motivation

- What makes your students motivated in relation to reading fiction?
- How do students typically express varying levels of motivation in class when involved with a literature unit?
- How do these attitudes towards fiction, and expressed levels of motivation, affect your literature instruction?
 - *How do you adapt your content and teaching methods to the class?*
 - *To what extent should teachers and students adapt to each other?*

Reading strategies

- How should one structure a literature unit? Short, long? How much time do students need in order to read and complete an assignment?
- How do you support your students while carrying out a literature unit?
 - *What kinds of strategies do they need in order to be successful readers?*

Extra

- Can reading habits be developed and nurtured in a school setting? Or will we need to rely on external influences in order to get students reading again?