

# Teaching Interpretation Through the Epistolary Novel

*Using Bram Stoker's Dracula to Teach Literary Interpretation in the Swedish  
Upper Secondary EFL Classroom*



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## **Abstract**

This essay examines how Swedish English as foreign language (EFL) students in the English 7 course can be taught textual interpretation skills through working with fiction in the classroom, using Bram Stoker's 1897 epistolary novel *Dracula* as an example novel. A qualitative text analysis of Stoker's novel was conducted, using Grice's maxims of conversation and the concept of focalization, to determine the extent to which *Dracula* is suitable teaching material for the development of students' interpretation skills. It was found that, through its epistolary format, Stoker's novel requires interpretation in various ways and can thus be used for the present teaching goals. Three example tasks were subsequently presented and act as suggestions for how textual interpretation can be taught within this context. These tasks were designed using the didactical framework of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives and are explicitly connected to Skolverket's steering documents. The pedagogical implications of using these tasks were examined and it was explained that the tasks examine the skill of interpretation in differing ways. The tasks were designed to examine students' interpretation skills through both the epistolary format with its encompassing narrative restrictions and through the novel's use of interpretation-requiring literary devices. The study concludes with suggestions for future research concerning the teaching of interpretation through other epistolary novels and more practical student-centered research.

**Keywords:** teaching interpretation, epistolary novel, *Dracula*, English as a foreign language

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## Introduction

*I want you to believe ... To believe in things that you cannot...*

(Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, p. 223)

This is a line from Bram Stoker's renowned epistolary novel *Dracula* (1897/2012). The words are spoken by the character of Abraham Van Helsing, a Dutch Professor and, most importantly, a vampire hunter. The scene is narrated from the perspective of Van Helsing's skeptical ally Doctor Seward, as they are investigating some seemingly inexplicable recent events. With these words, Van Helsing wants Doctor Seward to open his mind and explore further possibilities. He wants Doctor Seward to view beyond the scope of the ordinary or what can be considered natural. Van Helsing believes that the transpired events are the work of a vampire.

Because of its unconventional narrative structure, and accompanying challenges, *Dracula* (1897/2012) can potentially be used for the development of students' interpretation skills and can thus be of interest for practicing English language teachers. *Dracula* is an epistolary novel, a literary format entailing some additional challenges for whomever reads it as parts of the novel are occasionally left unexplained. There is no ever-present omniscient narrator guiding the reader through the novel's plot or the characters' complex thought processes or emotions. Instead, the story is presented from multiple characters' narrative perspectives. Therefore, the novel is challenging to understand because it demands of the reader to constantly interpret what is being said, what the characters are thinking, and, on a primary level, what is happening in the story. Further, just like Professor Van Helsing says, the novel *Dracula* wants its reader to believe in its fictional narrative, to see the things that you cannot, to read between the lines, and interpret that which is never explicitly stated. It is for this reason that this paper will examine

the extent to which this novel is suitable material for teaching interpretation, and ultimately how this could be done in the Swedish upper secondary English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom.

The skill of interpreting written content is explicitly included in the English syllabus for Swedish upper secondary school. This paper's relation to the Swedish curriculum and the English syllabus will be further expanded upon in the section titled "Relation to the curriculum and syllabus". However, it should be stated that according to the Swedish National Agency of Education (2021), henceforth referred to as *Skolverket*, students should be given the chance to develop their ability to interpret written content through their English teaching. Further, literature is customarily an integral part of foreign language education, and Swedish upper secondary EFL education is no exception. All upper secondary school English courses include literature as part of their core contents. The course English 7 even dictates the inclusion of older literature and is thus in line with using *Dracula* (1897/2012) as teaching material (Skolverket, 2021). This study of how *Dracula* can be used to teach interpretation therefore aims to provide explicit examples of tasks to be carried out in the English 7 classroom.

This study takes its place within a vast field of research on English language teaching (ELT) and its inclusion of literature. As this paper will showcase however, there is a lack of research concerning the use of epistolary novels like *Dracula* (1897/2012) in the Swedish English language classroom. Additionally, there has been an acknowledged research gap regarding the use of literature in an EFL context specifically. This is important for this paper since, in this context, the English subject in Swedish upper secondary schools will be viewed as EFL teaching. With that said, this paper could potentially contribute beyond an EFL context. However, as it is explicitly tied to the Swedish upper secondary school steering documents, the

material presented in this paper constitutes EFL teaching and is best applied to a Swedish context. It is my hope that this paper will contribute to previous research on the teaching of interpretation in a Swedish EFL classroom, and moreover that it will provide teachers with examples on how to perform such teaching in their classrooms using *Dracula* as an example novel.

### **Aim and research questions**

The aim of this paper is to show how Swedish EFL students in the English 7 course could be taught textual interpretation skills through working with fiction in the classroom, using Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897/2012) as an example novel. The present research questions (RQs) of this paper are as follows:

- To what extent is Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897) suitable teaching material for the development of students' interpretation skills?
- How can tasks examining students' interpretation skills, based on Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), be constructed?

To properly answer how *Dracula* (1897/2012) can be used to teach interpretation in a Swedish EFL context it must first be examined to what extent the novel is suitable for this endeavor. Because of this, the first RQ regarding the novel's suitability for this teaching is included. This question will be answered through a qualitative text analysis of *Dracula*, using Grice's theory of conversational implicature and Genette's concept of focalization. The novel's narrative gaps that require interpretation will be identified through the concepts of maxims of conversation and internal focalization. The aim of the paper cannot be reached without first conducting an analysis of the extent to which *Dracula* is suitable material for this type of teaching.

Subsequently, the second RQ will be answered through the construction of example tasks showcasing how textual interpretation can be taught in the Swedish EFL classroom. These tasks will be based on the analysis of the novel and developed through the didactical framework of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.

## **Background**

### **Interpretation**

Before progressing any further, what *interpretation* entails shall be determined. Merriam-Webster (2021) defines the verb *interpret* as “to explain or tell the meaning of [something]” or to “present in understandable terms”. Interpretation therefore deals with exploring meaning and to make the incomprehensible understandable. Similarly, *Longman’s Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2009) defines interpretation as “the way in which someone explains or understands an event, information, [and/or] someone’s actions” (p. 922). By this definition, interpretation involves the explanation or understanding of something that is not explicit in its intentions. What these two definitions share is the notion that interpretation deals with the development of understanding. Skolverket (2011a) includes a knowledge requirement in the course English 7 that deals with the understanding and interpretation of written content. The knowledge requirement concerns not only understanding *what* is written, but additionally interpreting the *meaning* within the text (2011a, my emphasis). To specify, interpretation seemingly is the process of discerning and creating an understanding of something that is ambiguous.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper, its literary analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012), and three example-tasks, will be based on three theories of interpretation, literature, and didactics. These theories are Paul Grice’s theory of *conversational implicature*, Gérard Genette’s theory of *narrative discourse* and Benjamin Bloom’s *taxonomy of educational objectives*. This part of the paper will begin by exploring the relevant parts of the three theories, what they are, how they work and lastly, why they have been chosen for this paper.



### *Conversational implicature*

In the 1975 article “Logic and Conversation”, Grice wrote about the verb *implicate* and the noun *implicature*. His theory of conversational implicature explores how what is being said, or written, does not always correspond to the meaning that is implied. Grice explored the use of language, with a specific focus on communication in terms of conversations. Conversations are, according to Grice (1975), a cooperative effort (p. 45). He explained that, while speaking, writing, and reading, we are expected to follow a set of rules or categories to allow the communication to flow smoothly. These rules were called maxims by Grice and will be referred to as such from now on. These four maxims are the maxim of *quality*, the maxim of *quantity*, the maxim of *relation*, and lastly, the maxim of *manner*.

The maxim of quality deals with the truthfulness of what is said or written and instructs us to not tell lies or make statements lacking evidence (p. 46). Further, Grice explains that literary devices, such as irony, metaphors, or hyperbole are examples in which the maxim of quality is flouted as they involve categorical falsities (p. 53). The maxim is flouted as there is a discrepancy between what is said, and what is implied. I mention this here as literary devices are an important part of the analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012) in this paper. The maxim of quantity states that anything said or written should adhere to a certain quantity, i.e., that the amount said or written is not too much or too little (pp. 45-46). The maxim of relation states that anything said or written must be relevant to the topic at hand (p. 46). Lastly, the maxim of manner differs from the others as it is not necessarily about *what* is being said, but rather *how*. Anything said or written is to avoid obscurity, ambiguity, or other unconventional stylistics, and to be presented in an orderly fashion (p. 46). In literature, these maxims are constantly

being flouted and it is when this occurs that interpretation is required to follow the intended meaning of the text.

Grice's theory was formulated in such a way that it is applicable to various forms of communication. However, although it is applicable to texts as well, Grice mainly had conversations in mind as he designed his theory. In the analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012), though, this paper will apply Grice's theory to a literary work. It should be stated that there is some difference in the application of conversational implicature to literary texts compared to conversations. Practically all language use flouts the maxims, but literature appears to do it more often and in more creative ways in comparison. This flouting of the maxims is always in service of affording more implied meaning. Therefore, all literary stylistic choices, omissions, seemingly irrelevant inclusions, repetitions, or apparent lies in literature afford themselves implied meaning. Subsequently, when analyzing *Dracula*, this theory will be used as a tool to pinpoint cases where the text appears to flout the maxims and where interpretation thus is required. When the implicatures are then identified and interpretation occurs, it is shown that there is implied meaning, as opposed to direct or precise meaning, since the maxims appeared to have been flouted.

### ***Narratology and focalization***

Narratology will in this paper be used to investigate what effect *Dracula*'s (1897/2012) specific narrative structure has on the interpretation required by the reader. Genette (1980) used the term *focalization*, which will be central to the analysis of *Dracula*. He explained that focalization deals with the focus of narration, and subsequently divided the term into three categories: *zero* focalization, *internal* focalization, and *external* focalization. Internal focalization is the category of most relevance for this paper as it entails a narrative which follows the thoughts

and emotions of characters within the story, whether these narratives originate from one character or several. The most relevant application of Genette's definition of internal focalization is what he referred to as *multiple* internal focalizations, which was exemplified by epistolary novels (pp. 189-190). Genette's work on narratology was later built on by Bal (1997) and her explanation of how focalization influences on both a story and textual level will be an additional part of the analysis. The concept of focalization will be applied to the analysis to showcase the narrative restrictions that the epistolary format encompasses. These narrative restrictions impose interpretation requirements on the reader as the novel's events and characters' actions are presented from multiple focalizations.

Grice's theory of conversational implicature and the concept of focalization were chosen based on their relevance to the topic and how efficiently they could provide the analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012) with their own distinct perspectives. It is through using the maxims as tools to identify the narrative gaps within *Dracula* that this study can provide teaching materials for the teaching of interpretation in an EFL context. Furthermore, focalization will showcase the effect the narrative structure of *Dracula* has on the reader and the interpretational requirements that accompany the epistolary format. These frameworks thus provide two separate perspectives on interpreting literary content.

### ***Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives***

In his 1956 book *Taxonomy of educational objectives*, Bloom presented a taxonomy describing six different thinking processes involved in learning, with interpretation being a central cognitive process to one of them. The taxonomy provides a framework to be applied to content such as *Dracula* (1897/2012), and it will be used in combination with the three tasks created for this paper. However, in 2001, Anderson and Krathwohl built on the taxonomy Bloom had

created and it is their reworked rendition of the taxonomy that will be used for this paper. In this version of the taxonomy, the six thinking processes are labelled as *Remember*, *Understand*, *Apply*, *Analyze*, *Evaluate* and *Create* (pp. 30-31).

Furthermore, these thinking processes are divided into low and high order thinking processes where remembering, understanding, and applying are considered low order processing and analyzing, evaluating, and creating are considered high order processing. Firstly, with remembering, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) referred to retaining information within the long-term memory and stated that two relevant cognitive processes are *recognizing* and *recalling* (pp. 66-70). Secondly, understanding was described as the manufacturing of meaning and they mentioned *interpreting*, *exemplifying*, *classifying*, *summarizing*, *inferring*, *comparing*, and *explaining* as cognitive processes within this category (pp. 70-76). Thirdly, applying was explained as carrying out a procedure, with *executing* and *implementing* as the given cognitive processes (pp. 77-79). Fourthly, analyzing referred to how different parts of a whole relate to each other and to the whole itself, with the given cognitive processes being *differentiating*, *organizing*, and *attributing* (pp. 79-83). Fifthly, evaluating was described as making judgements through selected benchmarks and was presented with the cognitive processes *checking* and *critiquing* (pp. 83-84). Finally, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) defined creating as putting parts together to form a new whole and provided the adhering cognitive processes *generating*, *planning*, and *producing* (pp. 84-88). These various categories all make up Bloom's taxonomy and will be used in the designing of the tasks to provide them with didactic relevance and an explicit pedagogical framework.

## **Relation to the curriculum and syllabus**

This study's relation to the Swedish curriculum and syllabus for English in upper secondary school provides it with an anchor point to attach itself to. Perhaps surprisingly, interpretation is never explicitly mentioned in the curriculum. Although, it could be argued that the curriculum implicitly deals with interpretation as other scientific processes such as analysis or the development of understanding are included (Skolverket, 2011b). Interpretation is thus indirectly a part of the curriculum as an analysis cannot be performed without some interpretation. As per their core contents, Skolverket's (2021) syllabus for English states that all upper secondary school English courses should include literature. Further, the course English 7 specifically dictates that students should work with older literature. Skolverket elaborates on this by stating that older literature implies any literary work published before the year 1950 (2011a). Subsequently, Stoker's novel meets the requirements for older literature as stated in the English syllabus.

Apart from simply providing arguments and instructions to include literature in ELT, Skolverket's (2021) English syllabus provides further connections to this study. According to the aim of the subject, English teaching should not only provide students with the opportunity to understand written content, but additionally to develop their ability to interpret it as well. This notion is expanded upon in the courses respective core contents. The course English 7 dictates that students should work on understanding implied meaning within large amounts of texts. As explained above in the part where interpretation was defined, understanding implied meaning, as opposed to direct or precise meaning, requires the skill of interpretation.

For the reasons mentioned above, and the advanced nature of the text material, this paper focuses on the course English 7 in Swedish upper secondary school. English 7 differs from the

other English courses within Swedish upper secondary school as it is an elective course. Thus, the course could be deemed more challenging, both for the acting teacher and the students, which only further speaks for this study's focus on English 7. Lastly, the Swedish syllabus for English provides this study with arguments for its relevance and inclusion of the novel *Dracula* (1897/2012) in an EFL context.

### **The epistolary novel**

One dimension of the interpretational qualities of *Dracula* (1897/2012) derives from its narrative format. The encyclopedia *Britannica* (2021) defines an epistolary novel as a novel being “told through the medium of letters written by one or more of the characters”. Further, it is argued that the epistolary novel lends itself a sense of dimension, truthfulness, and intimacy (Britannica, 2021). By this definition, *Dracula* functions as an epistolary novel as it features multiple letter-writing characters along with additional newspaper clippings, telegrams as well as journal and diary entries. Additionally, the novel features an introductory note before the start of the first chapter that proclaims the events depicted in the story to be of a true nature. It is said that the novel's various chapters have been placed in sequence according to the order of events transpired and that “the records chosen are exactly contemporary” and therefore to be entirely trusted (Stoker, 2012, prologue). It is a common trope within epistolary novels to claim to be a collection of gathered authentic texts to thus provide the reader with a sense of realism.

### **Previous research**

Lastly for the background-section of this paper, and as briefly mentioned in the introduction, it shall be stated that there is not a great deal of research on using epistolary novels like *Dracula* (1897/2012) in an EFL context. There is, however, a great deal of research concerning the teaching of interpretation through literature, as well as research providing arguments for

including literature in ELT. This research lies as a foundation for this paper as it seeks to contribute to these fields of research. Furthermore, since the aim and RQs of this paper specifically deal with the teaching of interpretation using *Dracula* as an example novel, research regarding *Dracula* will be addressed, with a focus on topics relevant to the scope of this paper.

Research shows that the development of students' interpretation skills can be achieved through various means of education and using literature is one of them. Mustofa and Lyn Hill (2018) argued that during the reading process there are interactions between the reader and the text which occur through interpretation. Further, they argued that these interactions are affected by the reader's life experiences and cultural knowledge, as these factors in turn affect the reader's interpretation of the text (p. 33). Mustofa and Lyn Hill (2018) explained the importance of interpretation when they stated that the reader's interpretational skills greatly impact their "insight and appreciation of the text" (p. 34). A well-developed interpretation skill is thus of great importance for a complete understanding and appreciation of literature.

In addition to literature, current research showcases other ways of teaching interpretation through film and journalistic media. Cetinavci (2019) wrote about how understanding implied meaning is a large factor of pragmatic competence as he argued for a film-based instruction program (p. 581). His study showed that the program was a success as the experimental group showcased greater pragmatic competence compared to the control group (pp. 591-592). Additionally, Brega and Bazhutina (2020) wrote that the interpretation of media texts is "a well-known means of linguocultural competence acquisition" (p. 4). They argued that media texts always include stylistics and that through working creatively with them, students develop their understanding of explicit and implicit information (p. 8). Subsequently, it could be argued for the use of literature, film, and other media when teaching interpretation.

As per what this study has ascertained, there is a lack of research regarding the use of literature in specifically EFL teaching. On the one hand, there are plenty of arguments for the inclusion of fiction and other literature in ELT, but on the other hand, some researchers have pointed toward a lack of research within the field of literature teaching in specifically an EFL context (Divsar & Tahriri, 2009; Yimwilai, 2015). This paper thus aims to contribute to this field and attempt to provide some arguments to begin filling this research gap within a Swedish EFL context.

The existing research arguing for the inclusion of fiction and literature in ELT addresses the issue from multiple perspectives. One such perspective is that of literature's potential as teaching material expanding on language teaching's common focus on referential language function. In their study, Daskalovska and Dimova (2012) stressed the importance of the inclusion of authentic materials in language teaching. Their argument was that authentic literary teaching materials can help improve students' creativity, interpretation skills and provide them with a more personal relationship to the language. While this study did not focus specifically on ELT but on language teaching in general, it not only provides arguments for literature use in English classrooms, but additionally argues for the relationship between literature and the development of interpretation skills.

One additional field of research relevant to the topic of this paper is that of the connection between Bloom's taxonomy and interpretation skills. Asari et al. (2019) conducted a study aiming to investigate students' high order thinking processes using interpretation cards (IC) (p. 17). Students are presented with an ambiguous situation on an IC and discuss possible interpretations of it (p. 19). The study showed that this teaching led to students developing their



critical and creative thinking (pp. 21-22). Thus, this study further provides arguments for the importance of teaching interpretation, whether that be through literature or other means.

To return to the central material of this paper, the research that has been conducted relating to Stoker's novel is plentiful. *Dracula* (1897/2012) has been the focus of much literary criticism as there is a plethora of analyses that have been conducted from multiple perspectives. Frequent choices of literary criticism when analyzing *Dracula* are its depictions of gender and its sexual undertones (see Cocks, 2020; Kistler, 2018) as well as the novel's theme of progressive modernity vs. conservative tradition (see Macleod, 2021). Further, there is some research on *Dracula* that deals with it as an epistolary novel with a focus on its distinct narrative structure. An example of such research is an article by Ainsworth (2020) in which she conducted a literary analysis of the novel with the aim of explaining how and why its epistolary narrative format Gothicizes the text. She found that the explicit and implicit aspects of the narrative structure work in tandem to create a horrifying atmosphere both for the characters present in the story and the reader. This is a study that thus provides an explanation on the impact narrative structure can have on the piece of literature itself and on its reader.

## Method

### Material

Focusing on teaching interpretation in a Swedish upper secondary school EFL context, the material of central importance to this paper is *Dracula* (1897/2012). Since it is an epistolary novel, *Dracula*, through its narrative structure requires of the reader to read between the lines to find the intended meaning of the text. Interpretation is vital since the story is told from multiple narrative perspectives and in several distinct formats. For this reason, its main advantage for this paper is its relevance to the topic of teaching interpretation. Therefore, *Dracula* is both relevant to this paper and, as will be explained below, potentially of personal interest to students.

Something to keep in mind for teachers choosing to include a horror novel in their teaching is the effect the text can have on the students. Gothic horror novels, like *Dracula* (1897/2012), could be deemed too frightening or gory for some students depending on multiple factors such as their age, personal preferences, and life experiences. *Dracula* is at times quite violent, bloody, and wrapped in an uneasy atmosphere. It can, however, potentially function well as the teaching's central material if the teacher believes that it is under the appropriate circumstances. Another strategy to circumvent this issue is to only provide the students with selected extracts from the novel. This way, extracts can be chosen based on their exclusion of any potentially traumatizing genre tropes while still providing the necessary components for teaching interpretation.

One aspect of choosing what literature to use in ELT is the complexity of the language and how it can be a potential hurdle for students. *Dracula* (1897/2012) adheres to Skolverket's (2011a)

definition of an older literary work and thus features a relatively advanced vocabulary. However, this paper argues that the novel's language and vocabulary is not on a too complex level for students taking the course English 7. Additionally, Skolverket (2011a) states that the extent to which students are asked to read novels is decided by the teacher based on students' proficiency level. Thus, this paper argues that any student taking the course English 7 could reasonably be asked to read, at the minimum, extracts from *Dracula*.

It can be argued that any epistolary novel could have been chosen as the central material for this paper or as teaching material when teaching the skill of interpretation. While this paper cannot argue that this is the case as some epistolary novels will surely be more suitable than others, *Dracula* (1897/2012) was nevertheless chosen for this study. However, at this stage, it is not a claim of this paper that Stoker's novel is suitable material for teaching interpretation, as it is the function of the analysis to determine whether this is the case or not. Nonetheless, *Dracula* was chosen for the students' potential interest in the novel, as it can showcase the origin of the popular vampire trope. Vampires have gained incredible popularity through popular culture throughout the years, and it can be argued that all this success stems from the novel about the titular Count Dracula. It is therefore the argument of this paper that many students will find it exciting to read *Dracula*, the original and highly influential vampire story.

## **Method**

To fulfil the aim and adequately answer the RQs of this paper, the chosen methodological perspective is twofold. Firstly, there will be a qualitative text analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012). This analysis will attempt to showcase the novel's interpretation requirements and explain to which extent it functions as relevant material in the development of students' interpretation

skills. Secondly, three practical examples of tasks based on *Dracula* that could be used when teaching interpretation in a Swedish upper secondary school EFL context will be provided.

The analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012) will focus on the narrative perspectives of the epistolary format and its subsequent narrative gaps. It is within these gaps that the reader is forced to interpret the text and use their imagination as the novel's multiple narrators and their actions occasionally are left unexplained. As H. Porter Abbott (2015) creatively puts it, "[n]arrative gaps, in other words, open a vast arena of virtual events that are never realized but rather exist like a kind of dark, weightless energy, hidden under the words and images that actualize a story" (p. 104). It is by identifying these narrative gaps that the analysis will present parts of the novel that require interpretation and thus are suited as teaching material when teaching interpretation. These parts of the novel can subsequently be used as extracts in the designing of teaching materials. The analysis will adopt Grice's theory of conversational implicature as a method of identifying these narrative gaps as one example of instances where interpretation is required is when the maxims are flouted. The maxims will thus be applied to the novel, and examples of when and how the text flouts the maxims, and what effect this has on the interpretation required by the reader, will be provided. Additionally, focalization will be used in the analysis to showcase the effect the epistolary format has on the extent of required interpretation. The theories will thus showcase two levels of interpretational skills and what the novel requires of the reader.

The second and main method of this paper is the presentation of how interpretation can be taught in an EFL context. This will be based on the material the analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012) has yielded and what this material ascertains in terms of required interpretation. This section of the paper will therefore provide examples of teaching material, in terms of three practical tasks,

to be used when teaching interpretation. These examples of tasks will be tied to Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, so they ascertain a certain level of pedagogical and didactic relevance. Furthermore, these materials were developed with the English syllabus in mind and clear references to the relevant steering documents will be given. The tasks will first be briefly presented in one section, with their full inclusion in the Appendix, and subsequently their pedagogical implications will be elaborated upon.

One potential limitation of this study is that it cannot be fully replicated. While the analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012) features an explicit theoretical foundation and method, it is by its nature subjective and biased as it is impossible to separate an author from an analysis. As Bal (1997) put it, "reading is an activity of a subjective nature" (p. 4). Naturally, this influences this paper's reliability as there is a risk that another researcher would not reach identical conclusions in comparison. However, it is the focus of this analysis to argue for my interpretations of the presented material. My interpretation is just that though – one interpretation out of a potential many. Furthermore, the tasks created for this study are of my own creation and another researcher would presumably provide different tasks in comparison.

## **Analysis of *Dracula***

The goal of this analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012) is to examine the extent to which Stoker's novel is suitable teaching material for the development of students' interpretation skills. The two sections of the analysis will provide examples of extracts from the novel that, in differing ways, require interpretation. These extracts and the arguments of the analysis will subsequently be used in the formation of this paper's main goal, the construction of three tasks to be used in a Swedish EFL context when teaching interpretation.

### **Conversational implicature**

Through the application of Grice's theory of conversational implicature it can be showcased when and how Stoker's novel appears to flout the maxims, and subsequently requires interpretation. *Dracula* (1897/2012) flouts the maxim of quality a great deal and these exceptions to the rule take many forms. As mentioned in the theoretical framework-section, literary devices such as irony, metaphors, and personification are all examples of how the maxim of quality can be flouted and as such interpretation is required. The maxim of quality refers to a text not telling untruths or making statements lacking in evidence (Grice, 1975, p. 46). For example, the following lines are instances of two metaphors (M) and two cases of personification (P) taken from Stoker's novel:

M: [F]or many a long day loneliness will sit over our roofs with brooding wings (p. 204).

M: The blood is the life (p. 164).

P: The town seemed as dead, for not a soul did I see... (p. 105).

P: Death had given back part of her beauty, for her brow and cheeks had recovered some of their flowing lines; even the lips had lost their deadly pallor (p. 188).

While these metaphors are relatively simple to interpret, they have been written in a way that flout the maxim of quality as they make statements that, in the literal sense, cannot be true. For example, the metaphors state that loneliness has overshadowing wings and that blood is the same thing as life. There are naturally various, potential ways of interpreting these metaphors, and the context they are presented in can provide information for such an interpretation. For example, the metaphor “the blood is the life” (Stoker, 1897/2012, p. 164) can be interpreted in the vampiric sense that the titular Dracula needs to consume human blood to survive, or it can be interpreted to mean that the human characters need their blood to survive. Furthermore, the human characters partake in blood-transfusions on multiple times in the novel and therefore literary give their blood to another to save that person’s life. Further, the cases of personification attribute human qualities to something inanimate, as a town is described as dead or when the death is given the ability to give something away. In these cases, the reader must interpret the basic idea that a city, or a corpse, can attain qualities they would not normally have. Death is a concept closely tied to living beings, and in this case must be attributed to a quiet city at night. Metaphors and personifications thus have an implied meaning that require a basic level of interpretation to be understood. They may be considered simple metaphors and easy to interpret. Nevertheless, they make statements that, on a surface level, are inexplicable, but that on a deeper level have a hidden meaning. To interpret them, they need to be contextualized and their implied meaning must be understood.

Further, fiction is often constructed in such a way that it flouts the maxim of quantity, especially in connection to descriptions of scenery. These descriptions tend to be more extensive than

what is necessary for the reader to gain a basic understanding of that being described. The maxim of quantity states that a text should not include an insufficient or excessive amount of information (Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46). For example, in Stoker's novel when the character Jonathan Harker first arrives at castle Dracula in the beginning of the story, he provides in his journal a detailed description of the castle and its main door.

[I]n the courtyard of a vast ruined castle, from whose tall black windows came no ray of light, and whose broken battlements showed a jagged line against the moonlit sky (p. 15).

[I] stood close to a great door, old and studded with large iron nails, and set in a projecting doorway of massive stone. I could see even in the dim light that the stone was massively carved, but that the carving had been much worn by time and weather (p. 16).

The way these lines are written flouts the maxim of quantity as they could have been put more briefly while still providing the necessary information. They could have simply stated that the castle was dark or that the door was large and old and still have kept the same meaning. Naturally, however, literature appears to flout the maxim of quantity as detailed and colorful descriptions are part of the artform that is storytelling. One interpretation is that the detailed descriptions provide the novel with a sense of unease and lend the chapter a tense atmosphere with its colorful descriptions. The reader also learns more about Dracula through these descriptions of his castle. It is understood that the castle has been attacked but still stands secure and the darkness within foreshadows the Count's disdain for daylight. This additional information would naturally have been missed if it were not for the extensive descriptions the novel provides. Understanding the underlying reason behind when the maxim of quantity is



flouted thus requires of the reader to interpret why something is included in the novel to begin with. However, what is considered extensive information is up for interpretation. Someone else might not agree that the lines above from are extensively descriptive. In the end though, even the most extensive passages in a novel have an underlying meaning, even if that meaning could have been expressed in a shorter format.

Furthermore, whenever in literature when a character steers away from the topic of a conversation and starts talking about something seemingly irrelevant, it is usually a case of the maxim of relation being flouted. The maxim of relation concerns the relevance of everything included in a novel. In short, the maxim of relation demands one to be relevant (Grice, 1975, p. 46). An example of when the maxim of relation is flouted can be found in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Stoker's novel. In this chapter, the character Abraham Van Helsing is speaking to his companion Doctor Seward. Their conversation concerns the disappearance of children whom, upon reappearance, all have had two small, punctured wounds on their throats. These wounds are identical to those of a previous patient of the two men and Doctor Seward theorizes that whatever is injuring these children also injured their previous patient. Where the text flouts the maxim of relation is when Van Helsing disagrees with this conclusion and proceeds to spout about seemingly irrelevant topics instead. Instead of explaining his point, he starts talking about the nature of science and how "there are things done today in electrical science which would have been deemed unholy by the very men who discovered electricity – who would themselves not so long before have been burned as wizards" (p. 222). The text thus flouts the maxim of relation as the nature of electrical science is seemingly irrelevant to the two characters' conversation. However, one interpretation of this passage is that Van Helsing is making an elaborate point that requires of Doctor Seward to believe in things that he normally cannot.

Lastly, the maxim of manner is quite different compared to the other maxims as it is not concerned with what is written, but rather *how* it is presented. Grice (1975) describes that one should be orderly, brief and to avoid ambiguity and obscurity (p. 46). For example, the maxim of manner is flouted in a conversation between Dracula and his guest Jonathan Harker. Harker has cut himself shaving and with blood trickling down his chin Dracula lunges towards him out of blood thirst but accidentally touches Harker's crucifix. This stops Dracula in his tracks as he calmly but firmly states: "[T]ake care how you cut yourself. It is more dangerous than you think in this country" (p. 29). These words are both quite obscure and ambiguous and thus the text flouts the maxim of manner. There is a discrepancy between what is being said, and what the implied meaning of these words are. At a surface level, Dracula seems to be helpful as he appears to be providing a friendly warning, but on a deeper level, the sentence comes across quite differently, as it becomes clear that it is Dracula rather than the country that is dangerous.

### **Focalization and the epistolary novel**

The effect the epistolary format has on the interpretation required by the reader can be acknowledged through the concept of focalization. As mentioned in the section "Narratology and focalization", *Dracula* (1897/2012) adheres to what is called multiple internal focalizations as it is an epistolary novel. Genette (1980) explains that this entails a narrative that follows multiple characters who themselves exist within the storyworld (pp. 189-190). *Dracula* has multiple narrators with their own restricted narrative perspectives. Subsequently, the multiple characters' individual perspectives require of the reader to make interpretations based on the current focalizer's accompanying narrative restrictions.

To exemplify the interpretive effect of focalization, a sequence from *Dracula* (1897/2012) will be analyzed. In this sequence, Jonathan Harker has returned to London after surviving his

imprisonment in Dracula's castle. However, the focalizer of the passage is Harker's wife Mina as the chapter follows one of her journal entries. Jonathan and Mina are walking the streets of London when Jonathan sees someone who terrifies him to his core. He exclaims that "It is the man himself!" (p. 200) as he views who he believes to be Count Dracula, now in London. Mina does not understand what Jonathan is distressed about as she has not yet read the journal that he wrote during his traumatizing time in Transylvania. The reader thus experiences this through Mina, who sees Harker, who in turn sees the Count. As Mina is the character-bound focalizer of the passage, the reader is presented with everything through her perspective. Therefore, the focalizer of the passage is unaware of Jonathan's experiences with Dracula, but as the reader has previously read about these experiences, they are aware of the reason behind Jonathan's fear. The reader thus has more information than the character-bound focalizer. Before the other characters in the story read Jonathan's journal, the events that transpired in Transylvania are restricted knowledge, known only by the reader, Jonathan, and Dracula. Therefore, the reader needs to keep this in mind as they interpret the text based on who is the current focalizer and what narrative knowledge they currently possess.

Despite instances of the characters being restricted to knowledge that the reader is aware of, there are instances in the novel where both the character-bound focalizer and the reader are unaware of what is happening in the storyworld. One such example is when Lucy, one of Dracula's victims in England, cannot remember the nightly vampiric attacks she is suffering through. The reader has more pieces of the puzzle than the character-bound focalizer of these segments does, but the reader is still restricted in their knowledge as they have not yet been provided with a full explanation of these events. Bal (1997) wrote that the focalizer of passages such as these may not remember the attacks fully or correctly because of the traumatizing effect they have on her (p. 147). Further, Bal (1997) argued that traumatic events in the storyworld

can influence the novel on both a story and a textual level, as it may lead to the character-bound focalizer not being able to form a meaningful act of focalization, i.e., they cannot explain what they have experienced (p. 147). Thus, the events are left ambiguous and require of the reader to interpret the situation based on the insufficient information provided by the text.

To make a finishing point in this analysis, as the reader progresses through the novel, earlier passages gain new affordances. As new information is presented, previous parts of the story can be understood in a new light and can thus be reinterpreted. Because of this, there are sequences in the novel that may be challenging when read for the first time. To exemplify, chapter seven features a newspaper clipping and captain's log describing a ship's stormy journey and subsequent stranding on the shores of Whitby, England (pp. 88-100). One might question the relevance of this passage on a first reading as it is quite inexplicable without further context. A re-reading of these pages would however provide new insights as it is understood that it was through this ship that Dracula arrived in England and that the storm was of the vampire's making. An additional example can be found in the warning Dracula gives to Harker as presented above. When Dracula states: "[T]ake care how you cut yourself. It is more dangerous than you think in this country" (p. 29) it might be taken as a friendly warning if the reader is not already familiar with the character's vampiric persona. However, if the reader is unfamiliar with Dracula, this warning will be given a new meaning as the reader progresses through the novel.

## **Teaching Interpretation through *Dracula***

Based on what the analysis of *Dracula* (1897/2012) above has showcased, here this paper's examples of three potential tasks to be used in the teaching of interpretation will be presented. These tasks are based on chosen chapters and lines from the analysis above. Further connections to the analysis, Skolverket's steering documents, grading, and Bloom's taxonomy will be elaborated upon below.

### **Three tasks**

The tasks build on each other as they are based on Skolverket's (2021) grading system and the knowledge requirements of English 7 (see Appendix for the tasks in full). As with everything within the classroom, these tasks function as a basis for assessment. With the E-grade task, the student is to show an understanding of the interpretational qualities of literary devices. Further, in the C-grade task the student is to explain the interpretational effect the epistolary format has on the novel by examining a selected chapter. Lastly, the A-grade task combines the content of the two previous ones as the student is to analyze a selected chapter from the novel in terms of the interpretation requirements of its multiple focalizations and use of literary devices.

### **Pedagogical implications**

As the analysis has showcased, Stoker's novel requires interpretations on frequent occasions and in a multitude of ways. Through its epistolary format and its encompassing interpretive qualities, along with the plentiful of interpretation requiring literary devices, it can reasonably be stated that the novel requires interpretation. Thus, and in combination with its adherence to Skolverket's steering documents, the novel can be deemed suitable teaching material for the development of students' interpretation skills taking the course English 7.

The tasks presented above were designed with the following connection to the course English 7 in mind. Teaching in English 7 should provide students with “[s]trategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to *understand implied meaning*” (Skolverket, 2021, my emphasis). As explained, understanding implied meaning, as opposed to direct or precise meaning, requires interpretation. The skill of interpretation is thus applicable to Skolverket’s goals for English 7. Further, the knowledge requirements of course English 7 provided a framework while constructing the tasks. For the grade E the following is stated in the syllabus:

Students can understand the *main content and essential details*, and *with some certainty*, also implied meaning, (...) in written English in various genres of an advanced nature. Students show their understanding by *in basic terms* giving an account of, discussing, commenting, and drawing conclusions on content and details, and with *acceptable* results act on the basis of the message and instructions in the content (Skolverket, 2021, emphasis in original).

With this in mind, the tasks were adapted to adhere to the differing levels of requirements as presented for each grade. What differentiates the grades are the key words chosen for their respective knowledge requirements. On an E-level, students are expected to understand implied meaning *with some certainty* and to show their understanding *in basic terms* as they draw conclusions with *acceptable* results. As the grades rise to more advanced levels, the key words reflect the increasing expectations on students’ knowledge. For a C-grade, the answers are similarly expected to showcase an understanding of implied meaning *with some certainty*, however, students are additionally expected to show their understanding *in a well-grounded way* and to draw *satisfactory* conclusions. For an A-grade, students are expected to understand *both the whole and details* of the content and implied meaning, and to show their understanding

*in a well-grounded way* while drawing *good* conclusions (Skolverket, 2021, emphasis in original). As a result, the level of knowledge the student is expected to display for an E-grade is elementary in comparison to the higher grades.

Skolverket's knowledge requirements are reflected in the tasks as the E-task asks the student to produce basic explanations of literary devices. Further, the C-task features production on a surface level as the arguments are to be given *with some certainty* and with *satisfactory* conclusions. Lastly, the A-task was designed to combine the necessary skills of the two previous tasks as the student is to examine both the epistolary format and literary devices found within the chapter. For this task, the student is expected to produce a text on a nuanced level showcasing an understanding of *both the whole and details* in a *well-grounded way* and to draw *good* conclusions.

The student is provided with the freedom to choose which grade to aim for since it is the key words of the knowledge requirements, and not the content, that differentiates the grades. The student can choose to write the A-task, but if their text does not reach an A-level they can still achieve one of the lower grades. This way, the student does not risk failure and ending up without a passable grade whichever task they choose. However, the student will still need to consider that the E- and C-tasks only allow a maximum E- or C-grade respectively since they have been designed for those grade requirements specifically.

The tasks examine interpretation in differing ways. The E-task focuses on how literary devices are used in the novel, their figurative meanings and how they shape meaning or tone. It was decided to include similes in this task, even though they do not flout the maxim of quality, as they still require interpretation in other ways. For example, the simile "the thick eyebrows that

met over the nose now seemed like a heaving bar of white-hot metal” (Stoker, 2012, p. 44) requires interpretation as it must be understood why Dracula’s eyebrows are equated to hot metal. Furthermore, similes may flout other maxims as they could be considered ambiguous and excessively elaborate. If the same information could have been given in other ways, a simile may flout the maxim of quantity and if the simile is too ambiguous it may flout the maxim of manner. For tasks C and A, chapter 13 was chosen as the student’s reading material. It was chosen for its frequent use of literary devices and focalization through multiple characters. Thus, it is suitable material for an analysis of the epistolary format, literary devices, and their interpretative qualities.

Bloom’s taxonomy, and its categorization of thinking processes, was used in the making of the tasks. For the E-task, the thinking processes remembering, recalling, and analyzing are applicable. To adequately complete the task, the student needs to identify the literary devices, to recall them and thus remember their implied meanings and to examine how they work and contribute to the novel (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001, pp. 66-70). Since Skolverket’s knowledge requirements for the grade E are on an elementary level, the more advanced high order thinking processes of Bloom’s taxonomy are excluded from this task. For the C-task, some of the high order thinking processes of Bloom’s taxonomy are present. To complete the task, the student is expected to remember, understand, apply, analyze, and create (pp. 66-83, 84-88). The only thinking process that is excluded for this task is evaluation (pp. 84-84) as the student is not expected to make judgements in their text. The student is to examine the epistolary format in the given chapter but is not instructed to perform any explicit critiquing in this task. Lastly, since the A-task is of an advanced nature, it features all six of Bloom’s thinking processes. To adequately complete the task and write the instructed text, the student will need to remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create all within the same text (pp. 66-



88). This is naturally a challenge for anyone, but ultimately this is the top grade in the most advanced English course in Swedish upper secondary school, so the task is expected to be challenging.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show how Swedish EFL students in the English 7 course could be taught textual interpretation skills through working with fiction in the classroom, using *Dracula* (1897/2012) as an example novel. This aim was to be fulfilled through firstly, a literary study of the novel with a specific focus on its epistolary format, and secondly to provide suggestions of tasks based on *Dracula* to be used when teaching interpretation. The central RQs have concerned the extent to which *Dracula* is suitable teaching material for this type of teaching, along with how tasks to be used for this teaching can be constructed.

It was found that Stoker's novel not only demands frequent interpretation, but it also adheres well to Skolverket's qualifications for suitable teaching material. The three tasks are based on lines, passages, and a select chapter from *Dracula* (1897/2012). They function as suggestions for how interpretation can be taught in a Swedish upper secondary EFL context. The tasks are designed to test students' interpretation skills by testing their understanding of how the novel's literary devices and epistolary format requires interpretation. Additionally, the suggested tasks were given pedagogical relevance through the application of Bloom's taxonomy and their adherence to Skolverket's steering documents.

In the future, it would contribute to the research field to investigate what other novels could be used for teaching interpretation and what their differences are compared to *Dracula* (1897/2012), in terms of the quality and quantity of interpretation required. Further, as this study has examined the topic in theory, future research could be of a more practical nature. It would be contributory to research students' interpretation skills through a student-centered study with questionnaires or to investigate if this type of teaching yields tangible results.

However, this potential future research would need to define more clearly what the development of interpretation skills entails.

Finally, it is my hope that active English teachers in Sweden, as well as pre-service teachers, find this paper useful and educational. If for nothing else, I hope it can inspire others to think more thoroughly when choosing what literature to provide their students with. If even one teacher is inspired by the tasks created for this study and is influenced to work with *Dracula* (1897/2012) in their classroom, this paper will have been a success. Therefore, feel entirely free to use the arguments, tasks, and ideas regarding the teaching of interpretation that this paper has provided.

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## Appendix

### Three tasks for teaching interpretation

Grade E task:

For this task, the student is presented with various literary devices, such as metaphors (M), personifications (P), and similes (S), as selected from Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897/2012). These literary devices are presented without any written or oral explanations of their implied meanings but are given within their context in Stoker's novel. For example, the student can read the passage from the novel where the literary device is used. Some examples of literary devices for this task are:

M: [F]or many a long day loneliness will sit over our roofs with brooding wings (p. 204).

M: The blood is the life (p. 164).

P: The town seemed as dead, for not a soul did I see... (p. 105).

P: Death had given back part of her beauty, for her brow and cheeks had recovered some of their flowing lines; even the lips had lost their deadly pallor (p. 188).

S: [T]he thick eyebrows that met over the nose now seemed like a heaving bar of white-hot metal (p. 44).

S: I was dazed and stupid with pain and terror and weakness, but the sound of the nightingale seemed like the voice of my dead mother come back to comfort me (p. 167).

The student is briefly and in writing asked to provide basic explanations of the literary devices in terms of how they work and to explain their implied meaning. Additionally, the student is

expected to analyze what the literary devices add to the novel in terms of how they shape its meaning or tone.

*Bloom's taxonomy:*

The relevant thinking processes are remembering, recalling, and analyzing.

*Core content of English 7:*

Strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning (Skolverket, 2021).

*Knowledge requirements of English 7:*

Students can understand the *main content and essential details*, and *with some certainty*, also implied meaning, (...) in written English in various genres of an advanced nature. Students show their understanding by *in basic terms* giving an account of, discussing, commenting, and drawing conclusions on content and details, and with *acceptable* results act on the basis of the message and instructions in the content (Skolverket, 2021, emphasis in original).

Grade C task:

Firstly, the student is asked to thoroughly read chapter 13 of *Dracula* (Stoker, 2012, pp. 189-206). The chapter will be briefly explained within the context of the story prior to reading it to contextualize it in terms of who the characters are and what has happened in the story so far. Secondly, the student is tasked with writing a text of approximately one page focusing on the epistolary format of the novel, specifically of the chosen chapter, and how it affects the reading experience. If the student manages to produce a text that follows these instructions and includes an analysis of how the multiple narrators of the chapter requires of the reader to make



interpretations, they will have achieved a C on this task. The text is expected to discuss the narrative restrictions that accompany epistolary novels and their subsequent interpretation requirements.

*Bloom's taxonomy:*

The relevant thinking processes are remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, and creating.

*Core content of English 7:*

Strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning (Skolverket, 2021).

*Knowledge requirements of English 7:*

Students can understand the *main content and essential details*, and *with some certainty*, also implied meaning, (...) in written English in various genres of an advanced nature. Students show their understanding by *in a well grounded way* giving an account of, discussing, commenting and drawing conclusions on content and details, and also with *satisfactory* results act on the basis of the message and instructions in the content (Skolverket, 2021, emphasis in original).

Grade A task:

Firstly, the student is asked to thoroughly read chapter 13 of *Dracula* (Stoker, 2012, pp. 189-206). Secondly, the student is asked to write a text of approximately two pages with a two-fold goal. Through the text, the student is to identify, explain, and discuss the interpretation requirements of the literary devices found in the chapter and to present their argument for how the epistolary format affects the novel. With this task, if the student manages to follow the

instructions provided above and produces a text that includes all the aspects that it was instructed to, they will have achieved an A on this task. The text is thus expected to both examine the interpretive qualities of literary devices and epistolary novels with their accompanying narrative restrictions.

*Bloom's taxonomy:*

The relevant thinking processes are all of Bloom's thinking processes – remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create.

*Core content of English 7:*

Strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning (Skolverket, 2021).

*Knowledge requirements of English 7:*

Students can understand *both the whole and details*, and also implied meaning of (...) written English in various genres of an advanced nature. Students show their understanding by *in a well grounded and balanced way* giving an account of, discussing, commenting and drawing conclusions on content and details, and with *good* results act on the basis of the message and instructions in the content (Skolverket, 2021, emphasis in original).