

“It doesn’t usually turn out well when you’re
stuck with a book you don’t like.”

*A Study on Swedish Upper Secondary School Students’
Experiences of Reading English Fiction*



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Abstract

This research project investigates Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction, both within and outside of the context of their English language classroom. Three focus group interviews were conducted with 18 upper secondary school students from the southern parts of Sweden. Based on the collected data, five themes were identified. The themes were 1) the perceived superiority of English over Swedish, 2) including more classic works of fiction in English literature instruction, 3) finding reading inspiration from friends, family, and social media channels, 4) the structure of English literature instruction, and 5) reading English fiction, understanding its benefits, and whether that leads to developing a continuous reading habit. Further, through lifeworld phenomenology, specifically the fraction of sociality, an analysis based on the themes was conducted and the pedagogical implications of the findings were discussed. It was found that reading English fiction has social aspects to it as discussing fiction was common amongst friends, family, and strangers through social media channels. Finally, the research project concludes with a call for future research to explore whether experiences with English fiction differs between students in different Swedish upper secondary schools, geographical regions, and/or educational programs.

Keywords: English literature instruction, Swedish upper secondary school, students' experiences, English fiction, English as a foreign language (EFL)

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Introduction

As repeatedly reported in mass media and language research, Swedish youths' relationship with reading fiction is a complicated one. A report from the Swedish Media Council (2021), hereby referred to as Statens medieråd, shows that the reading habits of Swedish 11- to 18-year-olds have been on a steady decline since 2012 (p. 26). Such reports have been substantiated by the annual Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys which have, from the time of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) inception in the year 2000, indicated a steady decline in Swedish students' reading proficiency and comprehension skills of the Swedish language (Skolverket, 2013, p. 6). However, the results of 2015's PISA survey showed this negative trend beginning to turn around and this change in trajectory was further substantiated in 2018's PISA results (Skolverket, 2019, p. 6).

Reports such as the one from Statens medieråd (2021) are plentiful but mainly focus on Swedish youths' experiences of reading Swedish fiction (see also Kulturrådet, 2015). Simultaneously, other reports highlight that Swedish youths are increasingly exposed to the English language in contexts outside of their classrooms, also known as extramural English (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). This trend has displayed an increase in Swedish youths' interaction with the English language through mediums such as social media, video games, and music with English lyrics (Statens medieråd, 2021; Svensson, 2014). A trend can thus be acknowledged where the reading habits of Swedish youths are on a steady decline as the same students are simultaneously being more exposed to the English language than ever before.

Coupled with this increased interaction with the English language, there have been indications that English fiction has become increasingly popular with social media being a common way of spreading interest. Data from Svenska Bokhandlareföreningen and Svenska Förläggareföreningen (2023) shows an increase in sales of foreign fiction in Sweden. Some of this increase has been attributed to the hashtag BookTok that has garnered much activity on the

app TikTok (pp. 55-56). BookTok functions as a social online book club for young people where opinions on, for instance, English fiction are discussed, and recommendations are made. At the time of writing, videos under the hashtag BookTok on TikTok have amassed a global total of roughly 120 billion views (TikTok, 2023). This trend has influenced some Swedish libraries and bookshops to start incorporating specific bookshelves with titles popular on BookTok to enable easy access for library users and customers (Vennström, 2023). It thus seems that Swedish youths are once again starting to read and discuss fiction in their leisure time, albeit mainly fiction in English.

While previous research (Statens medieråd, 2021; Kulturrådet, 2015) and international comparison surveys examine Swedish students' reading proficiency in the Swedish language (Skolverket, 2023; Skolverket, 2019), the students' interactions with the English language does not receive the same spotlight. Due to the increase in exposure to the English language and an apparent increase in the popularity of English fiction, it is thus of interest to study Swedish students' experiences of English fiction. Through this research project, I wish to contribute to the research field on English as a foreign language (hereby referred to as EFL) literature instruction by examining Swedish students' experiences of engaging with English fiction. EFL, defined as “the teaching of English to students whose first language is not English” (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2023), is the term used in this research project when referring to the English teaching that the participants partake in.

A useful perspective to adopt when attempting to understand others' experiences with various aspects of life is that of phenomenology. This theoretical framework, and more specifically the concept of the lifeworld, will permeate the entirety of this research project. A person's lifeworld is a phenomenological perspective to be used to better understand others' lives, perceptions, and experiences of different phenomena. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2023) provides a general definition of the term as “the sum total of physical

surroundings and everyday experiences that make up an individual's world". Lifeworlds can thus aid us in better understanding others and the intricacies of their experiences of reading English fiction. In this research project, the social aspects of reading English fiction will be analyzed through the fraction of the lifeworld called sociality. I want to add that, based on my experience as a pre-service English teacher, there seems to be a general perception that Swedish youths are increasingly discouraged to read fiction due to distractions from other forms of entertainment such as movies, TV-shows, and/or social media. One way to determine whether this is the case is to directly ask the group in question and lifeworld phenomenology is a helpful perspective in this undertaking. Asking Swedish upper secondary school students about their experiences of reading English fiction, both as part of their schoolwork and in their leisure time, is thus a way of examining this phenomenon. Phenomenology, the lifeworld, and sociality will be further elaborated upon in the theoretical framework-section of this research project.

As English fiction is included in the core contents of all three upper secondary school English courses in the Swedish National Agency for Education's (2022) syllabus of English, hereby referred to as Skolverket, it is relevant to explore students' experiences of this material. Reading is included as one of the four main language skills (in addition to speaking, writing, and listening), and thus holds crucial importance in terms of language education. Previous EFL research has showcased that reading fiction in an educational context can aid students' English language development in numerous ways. For example, research shows that reading fiction can facilitate students' vocabulary acquisition, development of comprehension skills, empathy, critical thought and by encouraging social action (Alsup, 2015; Han & Anderson, 2009). Further, Phelan (2021) notes that through reading, close analysis, and interpretations of a text, we improve our ability to interpret and understand the world around us (p. xviii).

Furthermore, there has been an acknowledged correlation between engagement in leisure time activities and school performance. Research has indicated that student engagement with written material outside of the school context has a positive impact on schoolwork. Thus, reading fiction as a leisure time activity positively influences a student's performance in school (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Lao & Krashen, 2000). With this knowledge in mind, it is relevant to explore students' experiences of engaging with English fiction both within and outside of their English language classroom. To better understand our students, their relationship to literature and English fiction, and to ultimately improve our EFL literature instruction, it is helpful to take students' experiences into account. If teachers can consider students' preferences concerning the choice of fiction, what, if, and why they read in their leisure time, and what their reading habits look like, this will better inform the planning of EFL literature instruction.

Aim and research question

The aim of this research project is to investigate a selection of Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction, both within and outside of the context of their English language classroom. This will mainly be accomplished through the theoretical framework of lifeworld phenomenology, and specifically the fraction of sociality. This research project can thus provide English teachers with information to aid them in their English literature instruction by exploring Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction. The research question of this study is as follows:

- What are the participating students' experiences of engaging with English fiction within and outside of the context of their English language classroom?

To address the aim and research question of this research project, the next section contains background material covering the project's placement within a larger research context, relevant previous research, and an overview of the utilized theoretical framework. Subsequently, the study's methodological approach is presented in terms of how participants were recruited and how the study was conducted, along with its ethical considerations and potential limitations. In the analysis section, the study's findings are presented, and a lifeworld analysis based on the collected data is conducted. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the findings are discussed, the research project is summarized, and potential avenues for future research are suggested.

Background

Context

This research project takes place in a rich field of research on EFL literature instruction. Within this type of research, terminology can vary depending on the context of its use. Due to this variety of definitions, the meaning of fiction, and the definition used in this research project, must be established. A general definition of the term is that of a book “written about imaginary characters and events and not based on real people and facts” (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2023). Further, Skolverket’s (2022) syllabus of English mentions both literature and fiction as core content in the English courses 5, 6, and 7, but within this syllabus there is no further explanation as to what this entails. In Skolverket’s (2022) commentary material on the subject of English, however, it is established that fiction entails short stories, novels, plays, songs, and poetry. Further, older works of fiction are included in the syllabi and entail works of literature written before the middle of the 20th century (p. 16). For this research project, the above definitions of fiction are adequate as it assumingly closely aligns with the definition the participating upper secondary school students would provide themselves. This assumption is made as the students’ past experiences of reading fiction quite possibly have been affected by their daily interactions with material based on Skolverket’s writings. By exploring the students’ definitions of fiction, researchers can attempt to better understand the essence of students’ experiences of reading fiction.

In the introduction, EFL was defined as “the teaching of English to students whose first language is not English” (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2023) and, by this definition, most English language teaching in Sweden falls under this category. Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016), however, mention that there is a debate whether English should be treated as a second language in many EFL countries and specifically mention Sweden as an example of this development (p. 24). Perhaps this is due to Swedish students being increasingly exposed to the English language

in their leisure time and its apparent popularity amongst the younger generations. Furthermore, this has pedagogical implications for Swedish students' English language learning. Despite this, Sweden would, by definition, still be defined as an EFL country and this is thus the most relevant and accurate definition in this context.

As Skolverket (2011) includes fiction in all upper secondary school English courses, this inclusion indicates an explicit connection between reading fiction and EFL instruction. Previous research on EFL literature instruction is plentiful and the arguments for including fiction in English language learning are strong. Researchers arguing for this inclusion state that reading fiction increases students' abilities to interpret, reflect and infer based on the material (Economou, 2015, p. 100; Phelan, 2021). Furthermore, this type of teaching has showcased improvements in students' empathy and tolerance of others, creativity, vocabulary, and how it facilitates students' critical thinking (Khan & Alasmari, 2018, pp. 168-170). English literature instruction can aid in students' vocabulary acquisition, the development of their comprehension skills and critical thought, along with encouraging altruistic behavior (Alsup, 2015; Han & Anderson, 2009). With the goal of students' English language development in mind, there are a plethora of reasons for focusing on English literature instruction.

Much of the research presented above has concerned international EFL literature instruction and not been specifically situated within the Swedish context. This international research is, however, of relevance to this research project as it has been established that English teaching in Sweden classifies as EFL instruction. What research has been conducted regarding this topic in Sweden mostly regards literature instruction, using fiction written in Swedish, to improve reading comprehension and literary competence. Two studies by Nordberg (2014) explored students' reading habits and motivation to read fiction. It was found that students often have a positive perception of reading fiction but that they often choose not to and instead spend their time with other forms of media consumption. It is thus my argument that both the

international research on English fiction and EFL instruction, along with this Swedish research on Swedish fiction, is of relevance to this research project. While they focus on separate, but adjacent topics, it is within this gap that this research project puts itself. I wish to combine these two fields of research and expand on the research on English fiction and EFL instruction in a Swedish context.

Swedish students' reading habits and experiences of English fiction

Previous research has examined Swedish students' reading habits and experiences of reading fiction. In 2015, the Swedish Arts Council (here referred to as Kulturrådet) was tasked by the Swedish government to create initiatives promoting improved reading habits on a national level with an increase in reading proficiency and motivation amongst children and young Swedes being prioritized (pp. 7-8). As mentioned previously, this came as a result of the continuous decline in Swedish students' reading proficiency results on international surveys like PISA (p. 7). In Kulturrådet's (2015) report, it is stated that reading fiction for pleasure is often placed in contrast to reading fiction as a part of schoolwork (p. 20). There thus seems to be a distinction between when, how, and why an individual chooses to read fiction and what motivates, or discourages, them to pick up a book. This study will explore the participants' experiences with this aspect of reading fiction. Furthermore, Kulturrådet (2015) explains that it is common to have a positive attitude toward reading fiction in general and still lack the motivation to take the time to read fiction (p. 24). Additionally, and unsurprisingly, it has long been known that a strong motivation to read correlates with a developed reading proficiency skill (Kulturrådet, 2015; Nordberg, 2014). While it thus seems like reading fiction often, whether in school or during leisure hours, is beneficial for an individual's reading proficiency skill, that fact alone may not be enough to motivate someone to improve their reading habits.

Previous studies have explored upper secondary school students' reading habits and experiences of reading fiction as well as how the habits of students' families, and friends can affect that student's personal reading habits. In another study, Nordberg (2017) conducted focus group interviews with 18-year-old upper secondary school students on their experiences of reading Swedish fiction. He wished to explore five specific questions and main concerns based on previous research. Those being A) students' positive experiences of reading fiction and simultaneous lacking reading habits, B) students' lacking what previously had been deemed required for literary competence while still being able to conduct successful analyses of fiction, C) students' distinctions between reading for pleasure and for school, D) students' unappreciated but simultaneously well-developed analytical reading proficiencies, and E) students' distinctions between the world of digital media and the analog nature of reading (p. 164). Nordberg (2017) found that the students identified how developed analytical literary competence derives from the reading habits of one's family, one's own experiences of reading in and outside of the school context, as well as one's own life experiences (p. 237). A study by Mullan (2010) also found a strong correlation between the reading habits of parents and their children, although this study focused on younger children and not students attending upper secondary school. Nevertheless, Mullan (2010) found that if children are encouraged to read fiction early on, and if their parents share these reading habits, they are expected to develop a positive perception of reading fiction (p. 427). However, previous research has also showcased that a positive perception of reading fiction does not necessarily lead to a continuous reading habit.

Other research has stressed the importance of developing a recreational reading habit for one's language development. For example, Cho and Krashen (2016) hypothesize that "the most important factor in reaching advanced levels in a second or foreign language is developing and maintaining a long term pleasure reading habit" (p. 1). Their study presented a

selection of hypotheses and concluded that, if future research substantiates their results, schools seldom fulfill the conditions that are required for students to develop long-term pleasure reading habits (p. 7). This only further stresses the importance to not only examine upper secondary school students' reading habits within the school context but to view their habits during leisure hours as well. An individual's entire life and world is of great relevance to didactical studies.

Besides the research on Swedish students' reading habits above (Kulturrådet, 2015; Nordberg, 2014; Nordberg, 2017; Mullan, 2010, Cho & Krashen, 2016), research has regarded students' experiences of and engagement with English fiction, as well as with other L2 fiction, in and outside of the EFL classroom. One aspect of such research deals with students' motivation to read L2 fiction and what preferences in terms of literary works they may express. Vardell et al. (2006), Cottell (2018), as well as Lenters (2006) all mention students' lacking interest in their reading material as being a hinderance for L2 literature instruction. In their study, Economou (2015) regarded this further as they investigated students' experiences of L2 Swedish literature instruction. Students in the study expressed a preference for literary works that introduced them to something new and were not too familiar (p. 114). Thus, while students recognizing and identifying with the choice of fiction may be important, they simultaneously seemingly want to be challenged with something "beyond their own frames of reference" (p. 114). Further, Cottell (2018) indicates that students prefer to read about mysteries, their hobbies, and cultures other than their own (p. 25). Based on their previous experiences, students thus are opinionated on the choice of fiction for their literature instruction and have expressed these preferences in previous research.

Further research has concerned itself with comparing students' experiences with fiction in their L1 and in an L2. A Swedish study by Svensson and Karlsson (2020) showcased a substantial difference in the participating students' level of engagement with a piece of fiction in their L1 as compared to one in their L2. It was found that the students did not engage as much

with the story or its characters when reading English fiction as opposed to when reading fiction in Swedish (p. 18). As such, while research has indicated that EFL students may be neutrally inclined toward reading English fiction, or at least not find it to be as enjoyable as reading L1 fiction (Svensson & Karlsson, 2020; Şentürk, 2015), other research has nevertheless indicated that students who successfully read a literary work in their L2 find it to be encouraging and that it motivates them to read more L2 fiction (Takase, 2007). Previous research on students' experiences of reading English fiction thus indicates that it is an advanced task for EFL teachers to choose fiction based on students' preferences, neutral engagement level toward L2 fiction, and to continuously motivate them whenever they are successful in their reading.

Lastly, researchers such as Lin, Wong, and McBride-Chang (2012), Kim (2011), and Lenters (2006) have all investigated students' differing views on reading English fiction in their leisure time as opposed to as part of their EFL literature instruction. In Kim's (2011) study, it was shown that the participating students chose to avoid reading English fiction in their leisure time since they closely associated it with schoolwork and its accompanying requirements (p. 876). This is substantiated by Lin, Wong, and McBride-Chang (2012) who indicated that students tend to view reading English fiction as something that brings academic advantages, but that they rather prefer to spend their leisure hours reading in their L1. Lenters's (2006) study meanwhile, demonstrates that students may prefer their leisure reading material to be in other formats and mentions magazines as an example (p. 137). Although, at this time of writing, this study is 17 years old, and the world of leisure entertainment has changed immensely. While magazines still exist, Swedish youths are increasingly spending their leisure time reading, viewing, and interacting with others in English on social media, through gaming, or other forms of entertainment (Statens medieråd, 2021). As such, it could be reasoned that, like in Lenters's (2006) study, students still find other forms of English texts to be preferable over fiction. As such, it might not be the act of reading in their L2 that students avoid, but that

it instead relates to their past experiences with the literary works chosen for their English literature instruction.

Theoretical framework

While this research project's overarching theoretical framework is phenomenology, the main analytical lens for this study is the concept of the lifeworld as it will be utilized in the analysis of the gathered data. The phenomenological concept of the lifeworld will act both as a tool for the analysis and provide a thematic perspective on the topic of students' experiences of engaging with English fiction. In this section, a brief general description of the theoretical framework of phenomenology will be provided along with a deeper exploration of the lifeworld.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a theoretical framework mainly developed by Edmund Husserl and his students Alfred Schütz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Using the framework, researchers attempt to reach an unbiased, and neutral, account of different phenomena. It is used to explain how phenomena present themselves to our subconscious before they are subjected to our conscious terminology based scientific system (Brinkkjær & Høyen, 2020, p. 96; Lawlor, 2020). Phenomenology is a way to understand phenomena as they are, and not as we view or label them, in an attempt to view them without any of our preconceived notions. Further, phenomenologists view language as a basis of knowledge that researchers must go beyond in their inquiry. It is the primordial constitution beyond what language conveys that is explored in phenomenology and researchers are interested in that which our consciousness is exposed to (Brinkkjær and Høyen, 2020, p. 97; Nalivaika & Tin, 2014). In other words, I am attempting to go beyond what the participating students say and trying to understand the data's underlying structures and themes. Brinkkjær and Høyen (2020) stress that it is the subject who provides

researchers with unique perspectives and ways of perceiving the object being studied which in this research project is experiences of engaging with English fiction (p. 97).

The concept of the lifeworld

Husserl saw that the sciences had lost their connection to the world as it is perceived by humans and subsequently presented the concept of the lifeworld. He believed that the rigidity and objectivity-seeking of the sciences had led to them losing their connection to our primordial experience and that the everyday lifeworld was needed to adequately meet this crisis (Lawlor, 2020, p. 114; Nalivaika & Tin, 2014, p. 15). Nalivaika and Tin (2014) explain that the concept of the lifeworld concerns our lives as they are and is as such unburdened by theoretical thinking (p. 15). Our lifeworlds are therefore a phenomenological concept to be utilized in research to understand our lives, experiences, thoughts, and opinions as they are.

To better understand the concept of the lifeworld, Ashworth (2016) presented eight fractions of the lifeworld with those being selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project, discourse, and moodedness. He writes that “each fraction is essential, and each melds in with the others. Yet we can think [of] each one separately, and view the lifeworld in its light” (p. 24). It is through these fractions that the lifeworld can be analyzed and subsequently better understood. Ashworth (2016) explains that each fraction is of relative importance to the phenomenon being studied, but all of them are relative to each other, overlap, and exist within any possible experience (pp. 23-24). In the analysis, I will mainly utilize the fraction of sociality. All fractions of the lifeworld are relevant to any lifeworld, however, and can be accounted for even if it may be difficult to distinguish them from one another in some situations. How this study utilizes the fractions in its analysis will be elaborated upon in the analysis itself.

Connections between phenomenology, the lifeworld, and fiction have existed since the dawn of the theoretical framework. Gosetti-Ferencei (2021) states that

phenomenological studies often explore fiction but explains that this mostly occurs through the medium of poetry (p. 149). She adds that researchers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre all recognized fiction as fruitful grounds for phenomenological reflection as it demonstrates phenomenological traits of its own. Provided examples include Husserl who regarded texts as phenomenologically observable and Heidegger who stated that the world becomes discernible through that which is written (p. 149). Whereas these researchers were interested in fiction as the data to be examined, this research project views fiction from a different lens. The participating students' experiences of engaging with English fiction constitutes this research project's data with fiction being the topic explored. Nevertheless, there is a substantiated relevance, interest, and tradition to conduct research on English fiction through the theoretical framework of phenomenology and the concept of the lifeworld.

Lifeworld phenomenology in practice

Lifeworld phenomenology has been used in pedagogical research since the 1990s with a multitude of empirical studies utilizing the framework (see Bengtsson, 1999, 2013a, 2013b). Through this research, lifeworld phenomenology was explained as built on regional worlds. Bengtsson and Berndtsson (2015) explain that an individual takes part in multiple regional worlds every day and that these regional worlds together constitute an individual's lifeworld (p. 23). The regional worlds could be a person's home, workplace, or a leisure activity during their free time. Further, Bengtsson and Berndtsson (2015) explain that every regional world has its own unique language and people and that interactions within regional worlds have characteristics themselves (p. 23). The connection between lifeworld phenomenology and education becomes apparent when schools are viewed as regional worlds for their students. The school as a regional world mainly concerns itself with education, which affects how the students interact with each other, others, and the regional world itself (p. 23). In this research project,

schools will be viewed as a regional world that together with other regional worlds constitute an individual's lifeworld.

With this study, I am not interested in exclusively exploring the upper secondary school students' school as a regional lifeworld. Instead, I wish to further explore the participating students' other regional worlds where they interact with English fiction. Lilja (2015) writes that schools are a regional world where students come from diverse backgrounds and carry with them their own experiences, conditions for learning, and wishes of how to best spend their time there (p. 43). Therefore, it is important to view students not only within the school context but to go beyond and explore their other regional worlds. To better understand their lifeworlds, a researcher must explore the regional worlds and examine how they are tied together.

Lifeworld phenomenology, along with Ashworth's (2016) fractions of the lifeworld, has been used as a methodological framework in pedagogical analysis and research previously. Ashworth (2016) wonders why a framework as applicable as the fractions had not yet become a standard methodological procedure for qualitative pedagogical research. Along with the research presented above (Bengtsson, 1999, 2013a, 2013b; Bengtsson and Berndtsson, 2015; Lilja, 2015), researchers such as, for example, Andrews et al. (2022), Asghar and Rowe (2018), as well as Nielsen (2005) have since then all adopted a lifeworld phenomenological approach in qualitative pedagogical research.

In their study, Andrews et al. (2022) state that the fractions can "provide researchers with a phenomenological analytic method" (p. 144) as they explore inclusive research for students with learning disabilities. They used the fractions for coding the collected data by identifying recurring themes and connecting them to the best aligning fraction (pp. 152-153). Meanwhile, Asghar and Rowe (2018) examine the pedagogic approach service learning and university students' perceptions of it through the lens of the lifeworld (pp. 339-341). They

claim that a lifeworld phenomenological approach is the best choice of methodology when exploring lived experiences (p. 341). Asghar and Rowe's (2018) interview study utilized discussions amongst the authors where they attempted to understand the participants' opinions and assign themes emerging from the data to the most relevant of Ashworth's fractions (p. 342). It was found that three of the fractions - sociality, project, and selfhood - were most significant for their research and as such these themes were explored in relation to the accompanying fractions (p. 343). Lastly, in their doctoral thesis on reading- and writing related learning disabilities, Nielsen (2005) utilized a contextualized ontology within the lifeworld phenomenological tradition. This source is noteworthy for its age relative to the others as it was written prior to Ashworth's presentation of the fractions. Despite this, Nielsen (2005) uses another set of terms in their thesis that closely resemble the fractions in function. Terms such as the lived body, time, space, intersubjectivity, language, communication, and project are all utilized in Nielsen's (2005, my translation) research. They write that the focus of the study is understanding lived experiences of learning disabilities and others' lived worlds by placing them in front of the lifeworld as a whole (pp. 21-22). In relation to the previously presented research, Nielsen (2005) conducts what is called semi-structured lifeworld interviews which Kvale (1997) explains has the purpose of interpreting a phenomenon based on gathered descriptions of it within the interviewee's lifeworld (p. 13).

These studies are examples of qualitative pedagogical research conducted using lifeworld phenomenology and Ashworth's fractions. However, Ashworth's fractions of the lifeworld are yet to be fully utilized within phenomenological research, and even less within the qualitative research tradition (Andrews et al., 2022, p. 155). Hopefully, this research project can contribute to this growing choice of methodological approach and showcase the use of lifeworld phenomenology and Ashworth's fractions within English language learning research.

Methodological approach

Due to the nature of this research project's aim and its focus on students' experiences of a phenomenon, a qualitative research approach was utilized. As Nunan (1992) puts it, qualitative research is mainly adopted when attempting to understand human behavior and when the study calls for subjectivity (p. 4). With this qualitative approach, it is necessary to stress that I am not attempting to provide any form of generalizable or representative conclusions with this research project. This is substantiated by Nunan (1992) who explains that rather than striving for any resemblance of objective truth, a qualitative approach is adopted to understand human behavior through "the subjective perceptions and belief systems of those involved in the research" (p. 54). By going straight to the source of information, the Swedish upper secondary school students themselves, I can gather and analyze data on the topic to begin understanding their experiences of it. Additionally, the potential limitations and ethical considerations of the chosen method will be elaborated upon below.

Method for data collection

The method for this study has been to conduct semi-structured focus group interviews with Swedish upper secondary school students of various ages. As explained by Englander and Morley (2022), the relationship between the method of data collection and the phenomenon being researched should be a mutually beneficial one, i.e., the methodology should "solicit maximally good descriptions of the phenomenon within the context of everyday life" (p. 30). While individual interviews are common practice in phenomenological research, for this research project focus group interviews were ultimately chosen for a few specific reasons. Firstly, focus group interviews as a means of data collection brings with it a selection of advantages. Dörnyei (2007) argues that focus group interviews are useful as the participants usually find them stress-free, potentially even enjoyable compared to the more personal

individual interviews, and that they usually provide the researcher with plentiful amounts of rich data (p. 146). As such, there was an expectation that the participants would find this to be a more comfortable solution as opposed to individual interviews. Secondly, these focus group interviews will facilitate fruitful discussions on the present topic as the participants will be able to bounce off each other and build on what is being said during the interview. Subsequently, the goal was for the focus group interviews to allow the participants to discuss their experiences of reading English fiction in a non-scrutinizing and welcoming environment. Thirdly, from a practical point of view, focus group interviews are more time efficient than individual interviews and thus more in line with the scope of this research project. Orbe (2000) describes focus group interviews in phenomenological research as allowing the researcher to gather several individuals' experiences of a phenomenon simultaneously as well as how they allow for "synergistic insights unattainable during individual interviews" (pp. 612-613). Lastly, Wibeck (2010) argues for focus group interviews as a method for studies aiming to explore the complexity and context behind their specific participants' thoughts on a certain topic (p. 149). They then argue for the method by stating that it can enable the researcher to discover unpredictable aspects of the topic and that it allows for interpretation and to achieve a better understanding (p. 149). The choice to conduct focus group interviews was made because it allowed this study to explore the students' experiences of reading English fiction in a full and nuanced way.

Semi-structured group interviews were chosen as they were deemed the most suitable method for this study. Dörnyei (2007) explains that while structured interviews facilitate comparability and unstructured interviews allow for flexibility, the semi-structured interview is the most used compromise between the two extremes (pp. 135-136). Dörnyei (2007) adds that while semi-structured interviews include a set of predetermined questions in the form of an interview guide (see appendix B), the approach allows for an open-endedness

and exploratory quality to the interviewees' answers (p. 136). The semi-structured interview is an approach utilized to deeply explore phenomena while still pertaining to a certain level of organization and structure to the interviews. Through this approach, I will make use of an interview guide where the same questions can be repeated in each session while still allowing for follow-up questions and any spontaneous thoughts as expressed by the participating students.

The consent form was written in Swedish and the interviews themselves were also conducted in Swedish. This decision was made to avoid any potential confusion or errors in communication both during the interviews and when gathering the students' informed consent to participate. As such, as the language spoken in the interviews was Swedish, the interview guide and transcripts were also written in Swedish (see appendix B).

Recruiting participants

The process of finding and recruiting potential participants for this study was made through the upper secondary school teacher that supervised me during my VFU courses (work placement education). With their aid, I was able to pitch my study to three groups of upper secondary school students. In these pitches, I presented my topic, how and why I would need their help, and explained what would be expected of them if they chose to participate. They were then provided with a form where they could express their interest in participating and provide me with their contact information. All the potential participants were enrolled in upper secondary school English courses with each group representing the courses English 5, 6, and 7, respectively. The potential participants were all attending the same upper secondary school in the southern parts of Sweden.

After these pitches, I managed to gather 37 students who expressed their interest in helping me gather data for this research project. I contacted them via email and with further

aid from their English teacher, dates, times, and locations for focus group interviews were set up. Prior to these group interviews, the participants were given a consent form to read carefully and were encouraged to show this form to their guardians so they were informed and given the opportunity to contact me, or my supervisor should they wish to (see appendix A for the consent form). Ultimately, due to some unforeseen circumstances and inevitable dropouts, I ended up conducting three group interviews with a total of 18 participating upper secondary school students. The group interviews consisted of seven English 5 students, four English 6 students, and seven English 7 students, respectively.

Transcription process

Following the group interviews, whose audio was recorded with the consent of all present participants, the group interviews were to be transcribed. This is a process that can be quite time-consuming and challenging due to the number of participants involved but is necessary for the following step in the research process (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 146). Orbe (2000) additionally explains that the transcription process is important for phenomenological research as it allows the researcher to become increasingly familiar with the phenomenon being examined and how it is experienced by the participants (p. 614). Transcribing these focus group interviews and analyzing them was thus the second component of this research project's methodological approach.

Norrby (2004) explains that it is the aim and nature of the research that decides what level of detail the transcription should aim for (pp. 89-90). Since this is a qualitative study, and thus more interested in what is being said rather than how it is being said, the transcriptions of the focus group interviews are not necessarily word for word accurate. This approach to transcription is sometimes referred to as denaturalized transcriptions and is characterized by idiosyncratic elements of speech being removed (Oliver et al., 2005, pp. 1273-1274). What was

said in the interviews is included in the transcriptions, but instances where the participants stuttered, used filler sounds or words, or repeated single words consecutively were omitted. Furthermore, as this is a phenomenological study interested in lifeworlds, I am attempting to go beyond what the participants said in the interviews and to a greater extent explore the underlying structures and themes throughout the three interviews. The transcriptions thus function as representations of the interviews but were not conducted at the highest level of detail as that would be unnecessary for this type of research (Wibeck, 2010, p. 93). Furthermore, Oliver et al. (2005) add that transcription is often viewed as an exclusively “behind-the-scenes task” but that researchers should be more transparent regarding their transcription choices to better honor qualitative research and the ones who participate in it (p. 1287). Thus, as this study positions itself within the qualitative research paradigm, I strive for transparency in my research methodologies.

Method for analysis

The conversations and transcriptions of the semi-structured focus group interviews provided this research project’s data and, ultimately, laid the groundwork for its conclusions. Transcription and analysis, however, are not mutually exclusive processes as they are often conducted parallel to each other. The transcription process, and parallel analysis, helps the researcher get acquainted with the data and further aids in drawing substantiated conclusions from it (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 246, 257; Wibeck, 2010, p. 100; Orbe, 2000, p. 614). Dörnyei (2007) adds that the most substantial act of an analysis is selecting what to elaborate on (p. 257). Orbe (2000) adds to this by stating that it is through the transcription and parallel analysis process that the gathered data showcases emerging themes (p. 614). Thus, as transcriptions of the focus group interviews were conducted, several recurring, emerging themes within the conversations were chosen as the focus of the analysis.

Additionally, the analysis will be tied to this research project's theoretical framework. As explained previously, the concept of the lifeworld will be intrinsically linked and applied to the participating upper secondary school students' answers during the focus group interviews. The concept of the lifeworld will be used in the analysis to explore the students' social situations, both inside and outside of their school context, and be used to showcase students' experiences of engaging with English fiction. This connection will ultimately aid in accomplishing the aim of this research project and answering the research question.

The analysis process was conducted in several stages and mainly consisted of identifying, ranking, and analyzing a selection of themes as they emerged from the group interviews. As explained by Orbe (2000), a phenomenological method like this one is utilized to study the lived experiences of others (p. 617). After the group interviews had been conducted and the transcriptions written, the first step of the analysis was to listen to the recordings and take notes to identify any emerging patterns and themes in the data. Galletta (2013) writes that to find and take note of recurring themes within the data is part of coding and that these themes in turn mirror what was expressed during data collection (pp. 121-122). They explain that this kind of documentation can take many forms and provide examples such as using software programs, taking notes, or using sticky notes in transcripts (p. 122). Once the overarching themes had been identified, the next step of the analysis was to compare them to each other and examine which were the most relevant to include in this research project. Orbe (2000) calls this process of examining the data's themes and comparing them to one another *syntagmatic thematization* (p. 616). Subsequently, during the analysis process, a selection of the codes will appear more substantial and more closely align with the research question (Galletta, 2013, pp. 123-124; Orbe, 2000). Further, these codes will grow in relevance as they recur in multiple interviews and other sources (p. 125). During this analysis process, several themes were

examined but, ultimately, five were chosen to be included in my findings due to their relevance and importance to this study's aim, research question and theoretical framework. Finally, the last step in this analysis was to present the emerging themes as my findings and view them through a lifeworld phenomenological lens. These findings were presented and the concept of the lifeworld, specifically the fraction of sociality, was utilized in the examination of to the themes. Ultimately, as Orbe (2000) puts it, the goal of this phenomenological analysis is to "take these critical discoveries and return them to the lifeworld in which we live in order to increase understanding of human communication" (p. 617). Why and how the fraction of sociality was chosen, along with how it was utilized, will be explained in the analysis itself.

Lastly, how the group interviews and the participating students in the analysis will be referred to must be addressed. Whenever citing, or quoting, a specific student, I will refer to them using a number and a letter. The number represents the group interview, and the letter represents a student in that interview. As I have conducted three group interviews, the interview with students taking English 5 will be referred to as interview 1, the English 6 interview will be referred to as interview 2, and the English 7 interview will be referred to as interview 3. For example, when quoting student 2B, I am referring to student B in interview 2.

Ethical considerations

Throughout this study, I must oversee the ethics of the research, including, but not limited to, my role toward the study and its participants, the nature of the topic being explored, and comment on these ethical considerations accordingly (see Vetenskapsrådet, 2017). Two factors to be addressed in this section are the fact that the participants are all upper secondary school students, and thus not adults, and that they are previously acquainted with me in another context.

Christoffersen and Johannessen (2015) present four principles of ethical research that researchers should adhere to. These principles are as follows: The information requirement

which states that the researcher must inform those affected by the research about its aim. The consent requirement which stresses that participants in a study have the right to decide for themselves whether to participate. The confidentiality requirement which mentions that the personal information of everyone involved must be managed with the utmost level of confidentiality and stored in a way that only those who are authorized have access to it. Lastly, the utilization requirement which states that any personal information on individuals gathered for a study must be used for research purposes only (p. 46). These four principles have been accounted for and adhered to throughout the research process for this project. For example, when recruiting participants and prior to conducting the focus group interviews, I was adamant about the study's topic, how it would be conducted, what information I would gather, and for what reason. Additionally, the participants were informed that any gathered personal information would be safely stored, that they would be completely anonymous, and were allowed to leave the study at any point without having to provide a reason as to why. Further, I have provided them with pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity and removed any factors in their contributions to the study that could be identifiable or lead back to their person in any way.

Since the participants are all attending upper secondary school, their age must be addressed. Christoffersen and Johannessen (2015) state that if the information gathered for a study is not of a sensitive nature, participants of at least 15 years of age are allowed to provide personal consent for their participation and parental consent is thus not required (p. 50). However, since the participants are upper secondary school students, I additionally encouraged them to inform their guardians of their participation and to show them the consent form ahead of the focus group interviews.

The second factor to be addressed in this section is the fact that the participants were previously acquainted with me in another context. Prior to writing this research project, I had been in contact with the participants during my teacher training program as I attended their

school for my VFU courses (work placement education). Malone (2003) has highlighted potential ethical dilemmas involved in conducting research in one's own place of work (p. 801), and while I do not work at the present upper secondary school, it is worth addressing these ethical challenges since I had a professional relationship with these participants prior to writing this research project. Malone (2003) warns that research in this context leads to an unequal power hierarchy and that participants may feel unable to withdraw from the study without repercussions (p. 803). I addressed this in my study as the first thing I told the potential participants was that my role in this project would be different compared to what they were used to. I told them that I was not there as their teacher anymore and that they should therefore not view me as such. Further, Malone (2003) mentions participants not understanding the research method as something to ethically consider as the participant cannot give informed consent if they do not understand what they are consenting to (p. 805). As a result, the participants were informed about the focus group interviews in our initial meeting and what these interviews would entail was further explained in the consent forms. Lastly, Malone (2003) writes that while in a legal sense informed consent is adequate, from the point of view of ethics, informed consent still has room to improve (pp. 812-813). Thus, during this process, I have guarded against possible ethical issues and deal with them according to the principles of ethical research.

Potential limitations

For transparency's sake, this research project's methodological approach has a selection of potential limitations that need to be addressed. As explained above, the choice to conduct focus group interviews to gather data for this study came with a selection of advantages. However, as with any method, there are also some accompanying limitations with focus group interviews as a means of data collection. Mainly, as addressed by Dörnyei (2007), focus group interviews are

a time-consuming and complex endeavor that puts forth multiple challenges for the researcher (p. 146). These challenges include but are not necessarily limited to, the role the researcher must take on and the tendency for exclusively socially acceptable attitudes to be heard during the focus group interviews (p. 146). While conducting the interviews, I as the researcher acted more as a moderator, guiding the participants in their discussion, than as an interviewer who strictly poses questions to be answered. Furthermore, there is a risk that only a selection of the participants is heard, and it is thus up to me to provide an inviting discussion during the focus group interviews. Dörnyei (2007) stresses that individual interviews lack these risks as they allow for more personal and nuanced data collection (p. 146). Additionally, since participating in the group interviews was completely voluntary, there is a risk that exclusively students interested in reading English fiction chose to participate and as such, the findings are skewed. With that said, it is not the goal of this research project to provide any generalizable conclusions. However, with all these potential limitations in mind, it can be argued that a well-planned and thoroughly conducted focus group interview can both yield rich and relevant data and simultaneously account for all these accompanying risks.

Analysis of group interviews

In this section, I will present, analyze, and discuss the findings from the conducted focus group interviews. Firstly, the themes that have emerged from the conversations in the group interviews will be presented and connections to previous research will be made. These themes cover various aspects of the participating upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction as expressed on recurring occasions throughout the three group interviews. Secondly, these findings will be analyzed from a lifeworld perspective using Ashworth's (2016) fraction of sociality. In this analysis, sociality will be applied to the act of reading English fiction and tied to the past experiences the participating students expressed in the group interviews. Lastly, acting as a segue into the concluding section of this research project, the relevance of the findings as well as their pedagogical implications for teachers and students alike will be explored. In this section, I will create a connection between the data gathered through the three group interviews, my lifeworld analysis of said data, and their pedagogical implications for future EFL literature instruction.

Experiences of engaging with English fiction

The five themes are based on the participants' past experiences of reading English fiction as recurrently expressed throughout the three group interviews, in separate discussions and by multiple, independently participating students. Since I was the one to identify the themes, there exists an unavoidable bias as another researcher may have identified, or placed further weight on, other themes. The themes are 1) the superiority of the English language over the Swedish language, 2) a call for including more classic works of fiction in English literature instruction, 3) finding inspiration for what to read in their free time from friends, family, and social media channels, 4) their shared, recurring, and mixed experiences with the structure of English literature instruction, and lastly 5) their positive perceptions of reading English fiction,

understanding of the benefits of it, and whether or not that is enough to motivate them to develop continuous reading habits. All five recurring themes will be explored individually below.

The superiority of the English language

The first of the themes from the group interviews is that of the students' experiences with the English language as compared to the Swedish language. The English language is largely favored over Swedish in a multitude of ways. One student even expressed a strong preference toward English as they proclaimed it to be a more nuanced language, with a bigger vocabulary, and that it is aesthetically more beautiful in comparison. Furthermore, many students expressed a preference to read fiction in its original language, which in most cases for these students seemingly was English, and consequently, heavy criticism toward translations was repeatedly expressed. At least eight participating students mentioned past experiences of reading what they considered to be poor, or incorrect, translations of books originally written in English and how that has led to their disliking of translated works of fiction. Student 3F stated that reading fiction in its original language is better as "it is supposed to be a certain way and that that changes a bit when it is translated" (my translation). Reading fiction in its original language is thus seemingly preferred and translations are consequently avoided whenever possible.

The English language was additionally viewed as more useful in matters of both future education and professional opportunities. For example, student 1D expressed that a well-developed proficiency in English has advantages, or is even a requirement, in several professional careers and that some higher education programs are exclusively provided in English. This closely aligns with previous research where students' have expressed their view of English as an academic asset (Lin, Wong, & McBride-Chang, 2012). Therefore, the

challenge that comes with reading fiction in English, rather than in Swedish, has its benefits as it aids in language development and subsequent future endeavors for the reader.

Lastly, some students claimed English to be a more accessible language in terms of easy access to fiction, both digitally and through more traditional means. They claimed that accessing fiction in Swedish is hard as popular books that garner attention on social media and in their social circles tend to lack Swedish translations. Student 3B explained how they mainly read fiction online and that accessing the titles they are interested in in Swedish simply is impossible. However, with that said, I wish to express some skepticism toward this. The claim that works of fiction that are gaining attention through social media channels mainly are English ones may be true but claiming that English fiction is more easily accessible compared to Swedish fiction in Sweden seems doubtful. While the report from Svenska Bokhandlareföreningen and Svenska Förläggareföreningen (2023) shows a 24% increase in sales of foreign fiction in Sweden between 2021 and 2022, the same report also showcases a clear dominance of Swedish fiction on the market. Thus, as foreign fiction is gaining in popularity, Swedish fiction is still the most common and best-selling language on the Swedish literature market. Claiming that English fiction is more accessible than Swedish fiction thus seems not to be true as Swedish fiction covers the vast majority of the commercial market.

More classics in English literature instruction

Another evident theme from the group interviews was that of the participating students' call for including, what they referred to as, more classic works of fiction in their English literature instruction. This is noteworthy as when asked what they think of when they hear the words English fiction at least seven of the participants mentioned what they called classics first and foremost. Authors like William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens were mentioned directly. The participating students expressed a lack of classics in their English courses and explained how they think that the fiction they do read is not contributing

enough to their language development. Student 3G mentioned how reading classics can be useful for one's general knowledge and how it additionally can contribute with knowledge useful in other school subjects as well. It was not elaborated upon how or why this knowledge would be useful though. These claims could have led to a discussion on the literary canon in English literature and how to incorporate it into English literature instruction. However, as the moderator of the group interviews, I chose not to pursue a discussion on this topic as that would have been outside of the scope of this research project. It would be of interest to further explore Swedish upper secondary school students' perception of the English literary canon in future research.

Once again, however, I wish to take a critical stance toward this claim by the participating students. As I am aware of some of the works of fiction they are or have been reading previously, I believe they have been reading what they would consider to be classic works of fiction on numerous occasions. In the third group interview, the participants discuss the novel they are currently reading in their English course, *Brave New World* by Aldus Huxley, which I would consider to be a classic work of fiction. Additionally, the same group has read and worked with titles such as *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margret Atwood and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury previously. Thus, I am not disputing or discouraging their call for more classic works of fiction to be included in their English literature instruction but said instruction could benefit from a discussion on what classic works of fiction entails. There seems to be a place for reflection on what works of fiction to include in English literature instruction and the students are opinionated on the matter.

Sources of inspiration

The third theme as presented here concerns the participating students' sources of inspiration when it comes to whether or not to read English fiction in their free time. During the group interviews, I asked the participants how they choose what books to read, how they

acquire them, and if any specific sources of information inspire these choices. The most common answer was that this inspiration mainly comes from family members and/or personal friends. Multiple participating students mentioned their parents, and other family members, as crucial in how they determine what titles to read in a few different ways. Parents seemingly offer recommendations based on their preferences and perception of what their child would find interesting and useful. This stands in alignment with previous research that indicates the importance of developed reading habits within the home environment and how that can positively influence an individual's experiences of reading fiction (Mullan, 2010; Nordberg, 2017). Student 1F, for example, mentioned how their parents would recommend English fiction based on the language challenge it would bring them, with titles such as *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov or *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown provided as examples. It was thus prevalent that the most common source of inspiration for the participating students were either family or close friends who could recommend books based on their personal preferences and close knowledge of the student's preferences. Additionally, the students mentioned how they frequently already had the books in question in their homes, or that they either bought them or were given them as gifts for birthdays or other holidays.

Another frequently mentioned source of inspiration for the participating students was social media channels such as the app TikTok. TikTok, and the hashtag BookTok, have been explored previously in this research project and the fact that the participating students mention the app in the group interviews further substantiates the connection between social media channels and Swedish upper secondary school students. Student 2A even mentioned how they went from being entirely disinterested in reading fiction in their free time to now finding much inspiration to read English fiction through TikTok. Both students 2A and 1D indicate that perhaps it has to do with an urge to fit in with their peers and better understand the works of literature that are being discussed online. Ultimately, the participating students claim to be

inspired by the people they closely align with and how they choose if, and what, to read in their free time based on recommendations from family, friends, and online through social media channels such as TikTok.

Structure of English literature instruction

The fourth theme presented here is more of an exploration of the participating students' experiences with their current English literature instruction. There were many instances in the group interviews where the students' opinions aligned, and a few where they differed from one another, but most commonly they agreed on their criticisms of how their English literature instruction is organized. One of the main criticisms seemed to stem from the way English literature instruction typically is organized with assignments and other tasks accompanying the reading of the text. Student 2D mentions how reading English fiction as a part of schoolwork includes exams which in turn leads to grading-related performance pressure. In the third group interview, there was a discussion on the number of accompanying assignments and tasks that the students are asked to perform as they read the texts. The criticism was that these additional tasks drain the enjoyment out of reading English fiction as the students constantly must stop reading, take notes, or analyze what they have read instead of simply reading and enjoying the text at their own pace. Only one student, student 3F, provided a defense for the structure of their English literature instruction as they mentioned how these tasks may be useful tools for their English language development as their proficiency in that language is not as advanced as that in their native language. However, student 3F also agreed that while this structure of teaching may be beneficial for them, it, unfortunately, comes at the expense of the texts as their appreciation of them is diminished by these additional tasks. These opinions on the nature of reading English fiction as part of their schoolwork closely aligns well with what has been indicated in Kulturrådet's (2015) report. In that report, it is stated that reading fiction for pleasure often is placed in contrast to reading fiction as part of schoolwork

(p. 20). As per previous research (see Kulturrådet, 2015; Gilbert & Fister, 2011; Lin, Wong, & McBride-Chang, 2012; Kim, 2011; Lenters, 2006), and the participating students in this study, there seems to exist a separation between the way an individual reads English fiction during their leisure hours and as part of English literature instruction.

Because of these opinions, being assigned reading schedules when reading a text for school was heavily criticized. The students expressed a preference to decide for themselves at which pace they were to read as that would lead to more enjoyment of the allocated texts. There was a general call for more unconditional reading to be included in their English literature instruction. Student 3D expressed these concerns when they said that if students are exposed to too many adversities throughout their reading, whether that be too many accompanying tasks or a heavy workload, it will inevitably lead to them taking shortcuts in their studies. They mention students choosing to not read the allocated texts at all or simply looking up summaries or analyses online as viable alternatives if the English literature instruction is too demanding.

While the participating students agreed on several aspects of their English literature instruction, there was one instance where not everyone agreed. Throughout the three group interviews, the participating students could not agree upon if they should choose what books to read as part of their English courses themselves or if they should be provided with one by their teacher. Previous research on this topic provides arguments for both alternatives (see Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Luukka, 2019; Vardell et al., 2006; Cottell, 2018; Lenters, 2006). The students' mixed opinions stemmed from personal interest, and preferences on what would be regarded as useful reading material, but also if the books their teachers picked were ultimately the best choice.

On the one hand, some students claimed that choosing the books themselves would be the better option. The main reason provided for this was personal preference and how that if they got to choose for themselves that would lead to greater enjoyment. Student 1F

mentioned specifically how in their experience, teachers often choose books based on their perceptions of what the students would like but how that rarely actually aligns with what they would choose themselves. Student 1F mentions how the books provided by their teacher often are “cliché” and how they always choose the same kind of young adult novels that they find no actual interest in. According to these students, choosing what to read as part of their English literature instruction themselves is preferable as they either have their own preferences and/or criticize their teacher’s choices.

On the other hand, some of the participating students speak against this and argue for their English teachers providing them with what to read. These students argue that they lack the necessary knowledge of English literature to make educated decisions on what to read and that being provided with a book can lead to them gaining new perspectives on matters they would not have encountered by themselves. Student 2C stresses that being provided with a book they have not chosen for themselves is the best part of reading a novel for school. They stress how it can provide them with new perspectives and how it enriches their reading experiences. Whether the students should be allowed to pick what books to read as part of their English literature instructions is thus a matter of some debate. However, it does seem like both sides of the argument can understand the other. None of the participating students seemingly reflected on how or why their teachers chose what pieces of fiction to include in their teaching and what arguments they have for their choices. Again, further discussions and reflection on how and why certain English fiction is included in their English language instruction seem to be called for.

Why read English fiction?

As mentioned previously, previous research on the topic indicates that, while Swedish students seemingly have a positive perception of reading English fiction, they often lack the motivation to take the time to develop a continuous reading habit (Nordberg, 2014;

Kulturrådet, 2015; Svensson & Karlsson, 2020; Şentürk, 2015; Takase, 2007). Additionally, this research points toward students possessing an understanding of the benefits associated with having a recreational reading habit but that they often rather spend their free time with other forms of media consumption. The fifth and last of the emerging themes that I have identified in the group interviews concerns this relationship between the participants' reading habits and experiences of engaging with English fiction. Throughout the three group interviews, the participating students expressed enthusiasm toward reading English fiction, and the majority of the participants claimed to spend a substantial amount of their free time reading either English or Swedish fiction. Further, when asked why they think reading English fiction is part of their English courses in upper secondary school and what accompanying benefits the habit can provide them with, the participants provided a rich mixture of answers. Most commonly, the development of one's English language proficiency was mentioned as a benefit of reading English fiction in school and in their free time. However, students 2B and 3C both mentioned how foreign fiction can allow the reader to experience other cultures and perspectives separate from one's own alongside the development of the reader's vocabulary and other language proficiency skills. The participating students seemingly possess an understanding of the benefits of reading English fiction as part of both schoolwork and in their free time. The students' understanding of the benefits of reading English fiction aligns rather well with previous research as vocabulary acquisition, development of comprehension skills, and critical thought are often mentioned benefits (Alsup, 2015; Han & Anderson, 2009). With that said, Bloemert et al. (2019) claim that EFL literature instruction and students' experiences of it is an "under-researched area" (p. 373) and as such, previous research on students' understanding of EFL literature instruction could benefit from this study's contributions.

Whereas previous research indicates that this understanding of the benefits of reading English fiction is not necessarily enough to fully encourage the participants to develop

a continuous reading habit (Nordberg, 2014; Kulturrådet, 2015), this study seems to go in another direction in this regard. Only a small selection of the participating students claimed to rarely read English fiction outside of the school context with all the students proclaiming that they read at least one English novel each year. Student 1E was one of the few who explained how they often are inspired to improve their reading habit through their English courses but how it never amounts to any substantial changes. They stated that they have a few books available to read at home but that “it is difficult to get started” (my translation). Thus, none of the participants in this study completely lacked interest in reading English fiction. It is here that a noteworthy limitation of this study must be addressed. As the students’ participation in these group interviews was entirely voluntary, it is only natural that mostly students with some level of interest in the topic of reading English fiction would choose to participate in the study. When presenting the topic and asking for any who would be interested in participating, I was adamant that no prior knowledge of the topic would be necessary or that any opinion toward it would be deemed better or worse. However, it would seem that only students with some prior interest in the topic chose to participate in this study’s group interviews, and as such the opinions expressed in the interviews may not entirely represent the experiences of other Swedish upper secondary school students. This may thus be the reason why there seemingly is a discrepancy between this study’s findings and previous research on the topic.

Themes and lifeworld fractions

Through lifeworld phenomenology, and specifically Ashworth’s (2016) deconstruction of the lifeworld through what they call fractions, a particular phenomenon can be studied and better understood. One of these fractions of the lifeworld is labeled sociality and deals with the social aspects of different phenomena. Ashworth (2016) writes that when “addressing the lifeworld in the context of a phenomenological psychological study of a particular phenomenon, we ought

always to concern ourselves with the relevance of others and of relations with other people. How are others implicated in an experience, and does the situation affect relations with others?” (p. 26). As this study concerns itself with the essence of the phenomenon of reading English fiction, and Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences with it, the social aspects of this topic can and should be addressed. Firstly, the data gathered through the group interviews provides ample opportunity for a lifeworld analysis through a social lens as much of what the participants discussed concerned social relationships in relation to their experiences of reading English fiction. These discussions, and the emerging themes above, will be examined using the fraction of sociality in detail below. Secondly, the methodological approach of this study is social by nature due to the choice to conduct group interviews as opposed to individual ones. As explained in the method section, this choice was made deliberately to facilitate discussion amongst the participants, and as such the study's method aligns well with a phenomenological lifeworld analysis using the fraction of sociality. This connection between the social aspects of reading English fiction and the participating students' expressed experiences with the topic will thus be examined using Ashworth's fraction of sociality.

Sociality and reading English fiction

Throughout the three group interviews, several social aspects of reading English fiction were discussed by the participating Swedish upper secondary school students. These instances of sociality concerned their experiences of English literature instruction as part of their English courses as well as reading English fiction outside of the school context. As the English language classroom will be viewed as a regional world in this analysis, this exploration of sociality and reading English fiction will begin with the participants' experiences of engaging with English fiction as part of their schoolwork. Furthermore, the participant's experiences of engaging with English fiction during their leisure hours and the social aspects of it will be explored as another regional world afterward.

Through one of the themes, the participating students expressed their criticism toward the structure of their English literature instruction. Much of this criticism found its foundations in the students' preference for social interactions during their lessons and how individual work was largely viewed as inferior. The students expressed that English literature instruction should mainly be social by nature as they called for more book discussions and other oral tasks rather than individual assignments. Students 1C and 2D both expressed how they find more enjoyment in discussing the works of literature they read as part of their English courses as that facilitates exchanges of different perspectives and thoughts as compared to working with the texts individually.

Another theme explored previously concerned the participating students' mixed experiences with whether they should choose what books to read as part of their English courses themselves or if they should be provided with one by their teacher. For this instance, Ashworth's (2016) term *reciprocity of perspectives* is relevant. As mentioned above, the students expressed differing opinions on this question, but they could understand why the other students with an opposing opinion believed as they did. Ashworth calls this reciprocity of perspectives one of the three essential characteristics of understanding another person (p. 26). As such, these mixed opinions and the students' understanding of each other is another social aspect of their experiences of engaging with English fiction.

The participating students additionally expressed their interest in reading more of what they called English classic works of fiction as part of their schoolwork. One of the reasons provided for this was a perceived growth in one's general knowledge associated with reading English classics and how this knowledge is useful in social situations outside of the school context. The students expressed how having read certain pieces of literature can help in social situations with other people as they wished to be able to understand and contribute to conversations with, mostly, adults. Student 2A explained how adults usually discussed classic

works of fiction and how having read these in school thus aids in their contribution to these conversations. According to the participating students, reading English classic works of fiction is a social activity as it can increase one's general knowledge and provides input in discussions and other conversations outside of the school context.

Leaving the upper secondary school as a regional world, the participating students mentioned multiple social aspects of reading English fiction that occur within their lifeworlds but that are separate from their regional school world. First and foremost, the students often discussed having conversations with others, mainly friends and family members, about reading fiction. These conversations could range from being about what to read next or simply discussing a work of fiction that both persons have read and now wish to process together. Additionally, social media channels such as TikTok seemingly had a similar social function in this regard. The students mentioned having social interactions with others online through social media about fiction and how hashtags like BookTok helps inspire their choices of what to read. Student 2A explained how they found the inspiration to read more English fiction through online discussions about books on TikTok. These online conversations and interactions concerning English fiction thus greatly contributes to the students' experiences of engaging with English fiction.

One of the ways that the participating students mentioned acquiring works of fiction was through being given books as gifts for birthdays or Christmas. Gift-giving is an inherently social interaction between two people, a giver, and a recipient, which can be connected to English fiction (Ashworth, 2013 & Ashworth, 2016, pp. 20-21). Ashworth (2016) uses the act of gift-giving as an example of a phenomenon relevant for a lifeworld analysis. In this study's group interviews, the participating students mentioned how they often receive books as gifts for different holidays, but these gifts were also criticized. In interview 3, the participants discussed how they rarely are intrigued by the books they are gifted with as they

seldom align with their literature preferences. Ashworth (2013) explains that gift-giving is “providing a benefit to another in recompense for expected or past benefits from the other” (p. 2). As such, it is possible that the giver is gifting a book to someone with the expectation of a future joint discussion about the story and its characters. Whether the recipient reads the title and/or fulfills this expectation is naturally not certain and in the case of this study’s participants, that seemingly is seldom the case.

Another inherently social way that the participating students mentioned acquiring works of fiction was by renting them at school and/or public libraries. However, there was some social anxiety expressed and connected to renting books at libraries. Student 2A explained how they get stressed by renting books because of the time pressure to finish it in four weeks. Additionally, the student added that “if I don’t [finish the book on time], I have to return it and then I feel bad to have rented it in the first place as I’ve kept it from someone else and not read it anyway” (my translation). Some other participants added to this by saying that sometimes the title they are looking for is not available at the library and how that is an additional obstacle that keeps them away from acquiring works of fiction from libraries. However, there was not exclusively criticism pointed toward libraries in the group interviews. Student 3E praised their school library for being accommodating and sending for titles if they do not already have them in stock. The student continued by saying that by using their school library, they have read multiple works of fiction and recommended their peers to utilize the library for themselves.

As has been examined here, multiple social aspects of reading English fiction can be identified and have emerged from the group interviews conducted for this study. Ashworth’s (2016) fraction of sociality shows that to understand a phenomenon like reading English fiction, the researcher must consider the impact of other people and how social relationships affect the phenomenon being examined. While reading English fiction may be a predominately individual activity, these interviews have shown that there is an evident social side to the phenomenon.

Reading English fiction can lead to discussions, with sharing of perspectives and opinions, both with friends and family as well as with strangers through online channels such as TikTok.

Pedagogical implications

This study's findings, the five themes, and the application of the fraction of sociality based on the group interviews have pedagogical implications that are relevant for both students and teachers practicing English literature instruction. Before examining these pedagogical implications, however, it must be stated that the participating students all expressed positive feelings toward the topic and that this study has been conducted. Student 3D, amongst others, expressed how it was important for them to be able to express their thoughts and opinions on their English education to a future English teacher. It seemed like the participating students enjoyed that future teachers want to hear from them and are taking their notions on English education into account as they felt that was lacking in their previous English teaching experiences.

One question comes to mind when reviewing the findings of this study as presented above. The participating students expressed that they would prefer more unconditional reading of English fiction as part of their English courses as they, for example, criticized reading schedules, accompanying assignments, and whether they should get to choose what books to read themselves or if they should be provided with one by their teacher. Thus, how can the students who wish to work with literature more independently be allowed to do that while the teacher still conducts English literature instruction that takes all students' individual conditions into account? Ever since UNESCO's Salamanca Statement in 1994, and along with Swedish educational law, inclusion, and everyone's right to education have been focal points in Swedish education (UNESCO, 1994; Skolverket, 2023). According to Skolverket (2023), all education in Sweden should be adjusted to suit every student's individual

condition, needs, and level of knowledge. It is thus the challenging task of the teacher to plan, conduct, and evaluate their teaching so as to the best of their ability provide an equal education for all. While the students participating in this study wish for more independent schoolwork and free reign to plan their reading themselves, it additionally seems that most of the participants have not understood the reason why their English literature instruction is structured the way it is. Even if some of them have an understanding as to why reading schedules and accompanying assignments are beneficial for English language learning, those arguments are seemingly not enough to convince them as to why these aspects are advantageous for English literature instruction.

Finally, as the researcher behind this project, my call for action on this topic is aimed at practicing English teachers. The participating Swedish upper secondary school students are opinionated on their English literature instruction but are unsure of the reasoning behind the structure of it. Thus, it would be advantageous for teachers of English to speak more openly with their students and explain the reasoning behind the structure of their English literature instruction. Being more transparent as a teacher is both beneficial for the students and the teacher as it allows for setting explicit expectations for everyone involved and for adjusting the teaching after the students' individual learning conditions.

Conclusion

This research project has aimed to investigate a selection of Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction, both within and outside of the context of their English language classroom. This was mainly to be accomplished through the phenomenological concept of the lifeworld and by conducting three focus group interviews with upper secondary school students. The research question has concerned the participating students' experiences of engaging with English fiction both as part of schoolwork and recreationally. Additionally, the answer to the research question has attempted to provide a connection between the participating students' discussions on the present topic and the phenomenological concept of the lifeworld.

This study's findings consist of five themes that emerged from the group interviews along with a lifeworld phenomenological analysis of these themes with the lifeworld fraction sociality as its central focus. The themes mainly concerned the participating students' experiences of engaging with English fiction within both the context of their English literature instruction as well as recreational reading of English fiction in their free time. Focus was given to both contexts as their upper secondary school and their lives outside of their educational context were viewed as regional worlds that in turn are part of their lifeworlds. These five themes are 1) the superiority of the English language over the Swedish language, 2) a call for including more classic works of fiction in English literature instruction, 3) finding inspiration for what to read in their free time from friends, family, and social media channels, 4) their shared, recurring, and mixed experiences with the structure of English literature instruction, and lastly 5) their positive perception of reading English fiction, understanding of the benefits of it, and whether that is enough to motivate them to develop their reading habits. Additionally, through the lifeworld fraction of sociality, several social aspects of reading English fiction as expressed by the participating students in the group interviews were explored. It was found that,

while reading English fiction may be a predominately individual activity, there is an evident social side to the phenomenon. Reading English fiction can, for example, lead to fruitful discussions amongst peers and family members as well as amongst strangers sharing the same passion for reading English fiction through online social media channels such as TikTok.

Along with these themes and the application of the fraction of sociality, the pedagogical implications of these findings were addressed. The participating students showcased a strong will to work more independently as part of their English literature instruction. As such, these wishes were compared to the teacher's task of conducting equal and fair English language teaching that adequately takes all students' individual learning conditions into account. It was suggested that English teachers should explain the reasoning behind the structure of their English literature instruction to their students as transparency is beneficial for everyone involved and may lead to more fair and equal English literature instruction.

As mentioned previously, there are limitations with the choice of methodology, theoretical framework, and the topic at hand that need to be accounted for. First and foremost, there are limitations associated with the choice to conduct focus group interviews as a means of data collection. As group interviews consist of multiple participants, there is a risk that not everyone present is heard and/or that exclusively socially acceptable attitudes are expressed (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 146). Additionally, since participation in the group interviews was completely voluntary, there is a risk that only students who are interested in reading English fiction chose to participate. Thus, while these findings are noteworthy and relevant for this field of research, it is important not to view them as representative of a larger population or generalizable by nature. Nevertheless, it was not the goal of this research project to provide generalizable conclusions but to help understand a selection of Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction.

While this study cannot provide any all-encompassing conclusions on Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction, it has identified some potential directions for future research. As this study has exclusively utilized a qualitative approach to research, it would add to this field of research to explore this topic from a quantitative point of view. Additionally, it would be relevant to compare additional factors concerning the participating upper secondary school students in a study of this topic. Aspects such as gender, age, choice of educational program, and level of language proficiency could all be potential avenues for future research. Furthermore, future research on a greater scope could compare students' experiences of engaging with English fiction across multiple upper secondary schools throughout Sweden. Exploring whether there is a difference in experiences of reading English fiction between upper secondary schools, geographical regions, or educational programs would contribute greatly to the research field. While more research is needed, this study has contributed with a lifeworld phenomenological analysis of a selection of Swedish upper secondary school students' experiences of engaging with English fiction. Hopefully, it can provide some inspiration to pre-service teachers of English and active English teachers in Sweden.

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Appendix A

Consent form as provided to the participants:



LUNDS UNIVERSITET

Samtyckesformulär

Du har blivit tillfrågad att delta i en undersökning om gymnasieelevers inställningar till engelsk skönlitteratur både i och utanför ett skolsammanhang. Syftet med undersökningen är att förse engelsklärare med en bättre förståelse för gymnasieelevers tankar och åsikter om att läsa engelsk skönlitteratur och att genom detta kunna bedriva bättre litteraturundervisning. Du har blivit tillfrågad för en gruppintervju eftersom dina tankar och erfarenheter som gymnasieelev kan bidra till studiens syfte och frågeställningar.

Ditt deltagande i studien är helt frivilligt och all insamlad information kommer anonymiseras samt enbart användas för denna uppsats. Ljudet från intervjun kommer spelas in och du har möjlighet av dra tillbaka ditt deltagande i studien fram tills den 21/5 2023. Studien är en del av ett pågående examensarbete och ditt deltagande bidrar därför till färdigställandet av denna uppsats. Du kommer kunna läsa det färdigställda examensarbetet då uppsatsen kommer publiceras på LUP Student Papers.

Härmed intygar jag att jag är över 15 år gammal och är villig att delta i denna vetenskapliga studie. Jag intygar att jag har förstått att detta deltagande är frivilligt, anonymt samt att jag kan dra tillbaka mitt deltagande om så önskas.

Vänligen signera nedan med datum och namnförtydligande:

Signatur: _____ Datum: _____

Namnförtydligande: _____

Stort tack för att Du vill vara med!

Erik Hed
Ämneslärarstudent vid Lunds universitet

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Ellen Turner
Handledare

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Appendix B

Interview guide as used in the focus group interviews:

Intervjuguide

- Presentation av mig och en kort förklaring att jag är här som forskare/ämneslärarstudent.
- Presentation av studien och hur den kommer användas.
- Instruktioner för hur gruppintervjun kommer genomföras och vad som förväntas av deltagarna.
- Genomgång av studiens sekretess och frivillighet.
- Deltagarna får ett samtyckesformulär att läsa igenom och signera innan gruppintervjun påbörjas.

Generella öppningsfrågor:

1. Vad tänker ni på när jag säger *engelsk skönlitteratur*?
2. Läser ni engelsk skönlitteratur i skolan?
 - a. Om ja, hur mycket?
3. Läser ni engelsk skönlitteratur på fritiden?
 - a. Om ja, hur mycket, vilken genre och i vilket format?
 - b. Om nej, vad gör ni annars på fritiden? Vad har ni för andra intressen?
4. Vad tycker ni om att läsa skönlitteratur på det engelska språket rent generellt?
5. Har ni något mer att tillägga om er generella syn på engelsk skönlitteratur innan vi går vidare till mer specifika frågor?

Engelsk skönlitteratur i skolan:

6. Vad tycker ni om att läsa engelsk skönlitteratur i skolan?
7. Varför läser man engelsk skönlitteratur i skolan tror ni?
8. Borde man läsa engelsk skönlitteratur i skolan oftare eller mer sällan? Är det en bra mängd som det är? Varför?
9. Om ni fick bestämma själva över er litteraturundervisning, hur skulle den se ut då?
 - a. Hur mycket tid skulle den ta upp?



- b. Vad skulle den innehålla?
- c. Varför skulle den se ut som den gör?

Engelsk skönlitteratur på fritiden:

- 10. Vad tycker ni om att läsa engelsk skönlitteratur på fritiden?
- 11. Varför väljer vissa att läsa engelsk skönlitteratur på fritiden tror ni?
- 12. Borde gymnasieelever läsa engelsk skönlitteratur på fritiden oftare eller mer sällan? Är det en bra mängd som det är? Varför?
- 13. Om ni läser engelsk skönlitteratur på fritiden, vad styr ert val av skönlitteratur? Hur bestämmer ni er för vilken bok ni ska läsa? Hur får ni tag på de böcker ni läser?

Avslutande frågor:

- 14. Vad tycker ni om det vi har diskuterat i den här gruppintervjun?
- 15. Är det någonting som vi har missat att ta upp?

Stort tack till de som har deltagit i studien. Ni kan alltid kontakta mig eller min handledare Ellen Turner om ni har några frågor.