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Fiction as School Assignment
An analysis of Students’ thoughts about fiction in the classroom

Skönlitteratur i skolarbete
En analys av studenters syn på skönlitteratur i klassrummet

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Abstract

This thesis paper examines how six upper secondary school students perceive assigned fiction. In particular the students’ thoughts on issues which affect their reading are studied. Moreover the way the assigned fiction is assessed is also explored. The interviewed students were goal oriented yet they expressed certain dissatisfaction towards how the fiction was used in the classroom and suggested other means to facilitate fiction reading in classroom settings. Two of the students expressed they were under a great deal of stress, and indicated this ultimately affected their outlook on fiction reading.

Keywords: English, fiction, motivation, upper secondary.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 7

*Background* ......................................................................................................................... 7

**Research Methodology** ................................................................................................. 15

*Ethics* .................................................................................................................................. 15

*Sampling* ............................................................................................................................. 15

*Procedure* ........................................................................................................................... 16

*Data Collection* .................................................................................................................. 17

**Results and Analysis** ................................................................................................. 19

*Presentation of the informants* ......................................................................................... 19

*The students’ thoughts on fiction reading* .................................................................... 21

*The students’ thoughts on assessment and available support* ...................................... 22

*Students’ thoughts on factors affecting their reading* .................................................... 23

*Analysis of the students’ thoughts on fiction reading* .................................................... 24

*Analysis of the students’ thoughts on assessment and available support* .................. 25

*Analysis of Students' thoughts on factors affecting their reading* ............................... 27

**Discussion and Conclusions** .................................................................................. 29

*Discussion* ......................................................................................................................... 29

*Conclusions* ...................................................................................................................... 31

**References** .................................................................................................................... 33

**Appendix** ....................................................................................................................... 35

*Interview questions* ........................................................................................................ 35
Introduction

According to Jack C. Richards and Willy A. Renandya many second language learners consider reading to be the paramount aspect of language learning (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 272). Reading fiction as well as non-fiction opens doors to new worlds. Students are constantly exposed to different kinds of texts and via these texts new perspectives and ideas, as well as a more developed vocabulary and writing skills. For this reason the objective of this dissertation is to gain a deeper understanding of adolescents’ perceptions and thoughts on reading fiction in school. The reading material examined in this paper was exclusively fiction. Six students were interviewed and their accounts on the subject have expanded my understanding of students’ views and expectations on fiction reading.

Background

The curriculum for the non-compulsory school system (Lpf 94) acknowledges the great demand the educational system imposes on students in terms of involvement. In addition to upholding essential democratic values the students are required to take “responsibility for planning and managing their studies as well as their influence on not only the contents but also its structures shall be important principles in education” (Lpf 94, Chapter I, §2 and 9). The significance of this statement is particularly apparent when students are presented to the multiplicity of literature assignments, specifically when assignments are to be completed in settings other than the traditional classroom setting. A great opportunity to examine these situations arose when it was apparent that the students at my partner school were to read several novels during my practical training. Moreover, since the interviewed students face the above specified demands their accounts should be put forward. How these students cope with the stipulated responsibility and to what extent they are involved in their own learning are not initially apparent since as a teacher trainee one is preoccupied with other responsibilities, such as planning lessons, and aiding the supervising teacher with his or hers day-to-day responsibilities.
The examined programme is a practically-oriented Social Science. To begin with the students have much more practical training on the schedule whereas other Social Science Programmes merely offer around two weeks of practical training. The school also specializes in training students for professions in the uniformed services. They are even tutored by employees of such professions. Whereas other Social Science Programmes provide more general education for higher studies the students at this upper secondary school have many more options available to them. They get experience in fields of interests at the same time as they get the necessary education for higher education.

At the school, English A novels are considered to be a class activity and read collectively. In English B, the students take more responsibility for their own learning. The students pick a couple of novels from a list containing ten novels. The list contains novels that accommodate to different levels of proficiency. There are more accessible novels for students who are merely aiming for a pass grade and more challenging books for students who are keen to get a higher grade. For each book, the weaker students participated in two group discussions while the high achievers just got one. All the informants felt the group discussions were where they learned the most. What they in general objected to was the fact they were to have quotation tests in which they were given around six quotes which they were to elaborate on.

What is remarkable about this school is that each year the entire first year participates in a reading project which lasts for weeks and where they do nothing but read. The reading weeks demonstrate the way in which the school invests in increasing the students’ reading skills; it is therefore interesting to examine how the students feel about this project and the mandatory reading of fiction stipulated by the curriculum. In the syllabus, the examined English B course is described in this manner: “The course has a more analytical focus. The perspective is further broadened to cover the use of language in varying and complicated situations. Familiarity with English-speaking cultures is developed”. From the sentences presented above the objective of this English course is to make the students more independent speakers and as a result more able to reflect on the learning process and the ways they make use of their analytical abilities. Moreover, it is also stated in the syllabus that students are to “take increasing responsibility for developing their language ability”. Furthermore, it is interesting to study to what extent the interviewed students believe they reflect on their own learning.
Purpose and questions

According to the Curriculum for the non-compulsory school system (Lpf 94) “the teacher shall take as the starting point that the pupils are able and willing to take personal responsibility for their learning and work in school”. Consequently, teachers should encourage students to take on more responsibility so that they finally can achieve autonomy. Students’ independence and self reliance is tested when they are assigned to read fiction independently. Understanding how the students perceive this task is the drive of this study. How teachers use fiction in classroom settings is an area which needs to be explored given fiction’s prominent role in the curriculum. The questions this paper attempts to answer are:

- According to students what is the role of fiction in their language learning?
- What changes, if any would they make in regards to how fiction is used in the classroom?
Literature review and previous research

As it has previously been stated being accustomed to all sorts of text is, according to the Swedish National Agency for Education, crucial. Moreover this is also evident in the syllabus for English since it clearly dictates that the students should “be able to orally and in writing summarize and comment on different types of texts, especially those related to the area of interest or study orientation”. For this reason it can be argued that by reading different types of literature the students do not merely expand their horizon but they also prepare themselves to be assessed and demonstrate that they have achieved what the syllabus required. If the students are to be able to independently establish a frame of mind where they can expand their learning, they are to “be able to read, summarize and comment on the contents of longer literary texts” and clearly, fiction falls under this criterion (Skolverket, 2004, Syllabus,). Furthermore even in the criteria concerning written work in English, the relevance of fiction reading is implicitly stipulated, seeing that by being exposed to different ways of writing the students are able to advance and hence more capable in regards to addressing different audiences and matters. “Not only can extensive reading improve reading ability, it can also enhance learners’ overall language proficiency (e.g., spelling, grammar, vocabulary and writing)” (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 274). Moreover when it comes to the more explicit criteria concerning the importance of reading it cannot be more clear than the aim wherein the Agency for Education states that students should “have a basic orientation to English literature from different periods,” before they are considered to have passed the course.

Studies conducted on the benefits of fiction reading are countless, and a simple search on the Ebrary catalogue confirms this. In the research literature it is argued that vocabulary is learnt incidentally through reading and discussing texts. Research also suggests that reading fluency closely co-relates with extensive reading consequently developing a large automatically recognized vocabulary (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 280). To increase students’ reading fluency, ability to obtain knowledge in academic settings as well as the background knowledge needed for these settings schools need to take on more responsibility in regards to providing the students with a large vocabulary as well as strategies in how to retrieve information from read texts. The more a learner reads the better he or she learns. If these
kinds of language programmes to be successful schools need to promote and uphold reading schemes in which silent reading is encouraged (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 281).

Since the focus of this research paper is to account for Swedish upper secondary school students’ perceptions on the matter the support one can expect to retrieve from existing research on the subject is rather limited. To narrow down appropriate theories relevant to this dissertation one has to determine what aspects of reading are important to investigate and highlight within this study. Certain subject specific parameters are needed not only to focus but also to make the interview data more accessible to interpretation. The interviewees’ accounts can be narrowed down to one main category, which is establishing an overview of their stance on reading fiction as part of their English acquisition and its assessment. One possible subcategory to the above mentioned categorization would be, examining the way the students view reading of fiction in general. Nevertheless it has to be stressed that the main focus of this thesis paper is to determine the students’ perspective on the assigned fiction.

As stated before the previous research on this topic does not specifically cover the exact field of this thesis paper. Nevertheless there are several thesis papers, which to some extent discuss certain aspects of the posed questions. One of the more interesting studies of upper secondary students’ attitudes towards fiction reading is Camilla Nilsson and Malin Tuveborg Svartling’s thesis paper *Att bara köra in en bokvagn fungerar inte* (2004). Although their thesis paper analyses Swedish fiction they manage to capture students’ general perceptions concerning reading fiction. Nilsson and Tuveborg Svartling interviewed students as well as educators and conclude that the type of fiction the students read in their spare time and the genre chosen by the teacher differ and this is a piece of information worth considering when assigning students novels to read. Furthermore the students in this thesis paper said that the assigned literature should generate interesting discussion topics at the same time as readers should be able to relate to the plot as well as the characters (Nilsson & Tuveborg Svartling, 2004, p. 41). Furthermore Nilsson and Tuveborg Svartling argue that the language in the novels can at times discourage students from further reading and for that reason varied assessment methods are aspects to bear in mind (Nilsson & Tuveborg Svartling, 2004, p. 36, 42).

Britt Perssson’s master’s thesis *Gymnasieelever och Läsning* adds another perspective to students’ outlook on reading since the studied students attend programmes in which a great
amount of vocational training is incorporated into the programme. Persson’s aim is to study students’ perspective on reading and writing as well as their reading habits. Persson concludes that there is a great difference between the reading habits of students who attend theoretical programmes and students who attend practical ones. Nevertheless students who attend theoretical programmes argue that lack of time is the primary reason they are unable to read in their spare time. They also agree that school work occupies most of their time and that they for this reason only read during their holidays (Persson, 2005, p. 40). According to Persson, students attending practical programmes seem to have an aversion towards reading in general. They exhibit awareness about school assigned fiction but their resistance is apparent (Persson, 2005, p. 41).

Furthermore since several reports from the Swedish National Agency for Education consider that secondary school and upper secondary school should function as correlating entities, in other words the education students receive from compulsory school has the utmost impact on how students perform in upper secondary school. This is why students from these two units are referred to as older students by the Swedish National Agency for Education, and this will be an approach adopted by this thesis paper. Furthermore both secondary school as well as upper secondary school do accommodate to adolescent students. Oxford English dictionary defines adolescence accordingly:

The process or condition of growing up; the growing age of human beings; the period which extends from childhood to manhood or womanhood; youth; ordinarily considered as extending from, 14 to 25 in males, and from 12 to 21 in females.

One of the more extensive studies conducted on students’ thoughts on English, is indisputably NU-03/Engelska (national evaluation of the English language in schools) in which the students’ proficiency as well as attitude towards the English language was studied. In NU-03, in which a comparison is made with other previous evaluations, students, teachers and parents were interviewed to determine how secondary education has developed during the 1990s (NU-03, 2006, p. 3). According to the report the students have gained greater influence over their schoolwork and their language acquisition (NU-03, 2006, p. 87). Nevertheless, when the examined evaluation is compared to previously collected data it suggests that even though the
amount of literature students in general read has increased their reading proficiency has
dropped (NU-03, 2006, p. 89).

Even though NU-03 only examines the thoughts of secondary school students its results and
relevance to this research paper is verified by Attityder till skolan. In this study students were
interviewed on many aspects of the Swedish school system. The conclusive results illustrate
that although a clear majority of the students are satisfied with the amount of support they
receive from their tutors, an alarming 33% are always or often stressed by the amount of
homework they receive. Other than that after school activities are mentioned as the source of
their anxiety (Attityder till skolan, p. 40-42). Furthermore, the research argued that stress is
more frequent in theoretical programmes than in practical ones. Even though Attityder till
skolan unlike NU-03 does not focus as much on particular subjects it highlights that
approximately 9% of the interviewees said during their English lesson they are divided into
different proficiency levels and of these 90% were satisfied with the division (Attityder till
skolan, 2006, p. 32).

This predicament is also apparent when teachers were interviewed in Nationella prov i
gymnasieskolan - ett stöd för likvärdig betygsättning which is yet another study conducted by
Swedish National Agency for Education. In this study, a majority of the interviewed teachers
agree that the students seem to struggle with analysing texts (Nationella prov i
gymnasieskolan, 2006, p. 64). The motivation the students exhibit in the A and B course is
dependent on the possibility of passing the courses. If the students are failing the courses they
become less motivated, whereas students who are certain of receiving a pass grade show more
elevated enthusiasm (Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan, 2006, p. 70). This study also
highlights that performance is dependent on what type of programme the students are
studying. In practical programmes, theoretical subjects such as English are amongst the least
prioritised subjects (Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan, 2006, p. 69).

According to John T. Guthrie and Allan Wigfield, professors of Human Development and
Director of the Maryland Literacy Research Center at the University of Maryland at College
Park, adopting a well-grounded structure may be successful when it comes to promoting
reading in general since it facilitates motivation which is commonly believed to be the
foundation of both understanding as well as engaged reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2005, p.
They also argue that there is a significant correlation between motivation and measurable comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2005, p.195).

However one of the more relevant studies conducted on fiction is *Texter i Dialog* by Birgitta Bommarco. This research paper targets the proper age group as well as topic, specifically upper secondary school students’ attitudes towards fiction reading in classroom settings. Although the students’ perception of fiction is discussed in great detail the language of the examined fiction is Swedish. However since the aim of this research paper is to shed some light upon students’ attitudes towards fiction in the classroom, *Texter i dialog* will be crucial to this study. In addition, Bommarco’s dissertation will establish a sense of balance to The Swedish National Agency for Education’s research since it discusses the students’ thoughts in depth. For instance Bommarco concludes that students’ experience of read texts is elevated if they get the opportunity to discuss the texts with fellow students (212). According to her students also seem to appreciate the fact that they by discussing the read texts are able to learn how to argument and put across their thoughts. To be able to intellectually argue for their stance in raised topics is actually the reason they appreciate group discussions as part of the learning process (213). Furthermore, Bommarco’s research suggests that if students are allowed to pick their own literature to read they invest in their own cognitive development (220). Students read more vigorously if they can relate to the text but also if they feel they are part of the process.

In reality there is a lot that can be done with the literature presented in this review. However, the aim of this thesis paper is to examine the posed questions and with the support of the available literature understand students’ point of view. The accounts of the interviewed students are to be compared to the research presented in *Texter i Dialog, Gymnasieskolan - ett stöd för likvärdig betygsättning, Attityder till skolan* and NU-03. The aim is to, without making any swooping generalizations, establish students’ thoughts on fiction reading in the classroom.
Research Methodology

Ethics

In *Doing Qualitative Research in Educational Settings*, J. Amos Hatch states that qualitative researchers working in educational settings have special ethical responsibilities since they are working with students who are more vulnerable to exploitation (2002, p. 66-67). That is why letters in which the parents’ permission was required were handed out prior to the interview sessions. The students were also informed that they were not allowed to partake unless they presented their permission slips. In the letter the purpose of this research and how crucial the student’s involvement was to this project were stated. Furthermore the parents were assured that their children were not in anyway forced to participate. Neither would the research affect their schoolwork. They were also informed that no personal information was to be revealed. The students’ names were to be replaced by fictive names at the same time as sensitive information would be omitted. Considering the age of these students one has to ensure that the ethical aspect of the research is attended to.

Sampling

Given that the students are the end users in this educational transaction their accounts are of utmost interest. Since upper secondary students’ perceptions of fiction were to be investigated, the research is based upon accounts from such students. Students from the B-course were selected for the reason that they due to their maturity are able to reflect on their education. They have also by now gained substantial insight into the subject and are therefore
more likely to freely express any appreciation or for that matter criticism they may have for the subject. Three girls and three boys were interviewed. Two of these students can be classified as weaker students since they struggle with their language acquisition, while a third student is in the middle in terms of language proficiency. The remaining three are what can be classified as high achievers. The three latter students expressed with complete certainly that they were confident that they would pass the B-course with distinction, certain enough that they were in pursuit of higher marks, whereas the two weakest students were hesitant about predicting what marks they would receive. More than six students volunteered for these interview sessions but the above mentioned students were selected so that their accounts would represent different perspectives on the same phenomenon. The used sampling strategy is what can be referred to as homogeneous sampling (Hatch, 2002, p. 98). Students with, what can be classified as, similar experiences were of interest, although their perceptions of the targeted subject varied their knowledge on the topic at hand was the precisely why they were selected. Moreover, the students’ willingness to participate as well as their familiarity with the examined settings and topics made them ideal informants.

**Procedure**

To obtain the required data for this thesis paper interviews have been the chosen method. By interviewing the students the researcher is ensured to receive a deeper understanding of the students’ thoughts on reading fiction. Although this paper does not aspire to disturb or in anyway unsettle the interviewees one has to take into account the possibility of such discomfort occurring. That is why conducting group-oriented interviews is a great way to access valuable data at the same time as the students do not feel interrogated (Johansson and Svedner, 2001, p. 24-25). These sorts of interviews are comparable to a formal conversation since the students are able to support each other in various ways. It is believed that students are more at ease with fellow peers in these kinds of settings, thus more likely to provide real life accounts of their educational experiences. Furthermore formal interviewing approach was deployed since this technique may generate more informant specific data (Hatch, 2002, p. 94). The formal interview’s forte is without a doubt its flexibility (Hatch, 2002, p. 95). Even so the
The interviewer has to bear in mind that there is a possibility that certain students dominate the group discussion while others become more withdrawn and reluctant to share their thoughts, however since these specific groups function very well together the likelihood of this occurring is slim (Hatch, 2002, p. 132). With the help of the informants’ responses, the informants’ thoughts were made accessible. Since this dissertation solely focuses on students’ perceptions and thoughts on fiction, it can even be argued that the thesis benefits from the chosen approach. The interviews were recorded, and each session lasted around one hour.

The interview session was carried out in the teacher trainees’ lounge since it was paramount that the interviewees were comfortable and more comfortable chairs were available in this room. Moreover that lounge was seldom used. Therefore an interruption free environment was guaranteed (Hatch, 2002, p. 115). The interviews were carried out during the students’ self study hours so that disturbance of their schedule was kept to a bare minimum and refreshments were available to prevent the situation from becoming awkward. After some casual conversation the students were asked to tell a little about their reading experience, and soon enough we were discussing the prepared questions. Informants who are relaxed are more candid about their accounts and this comfortable state was established by the way they were eased into the conversation and the relaxed environment (Johansson and Svedner, 2001, p. 27). The informants were allowed to detour from the prepared questions as long as they were focused on the topic at hand. The purpose of the questions was to structure the conversation not to limit it (Hatch, 2002, p. 95). The interviews were carried out in Swedish, since the students would be more inhibited in their speech if they were carried out in English.

**Data Collection**

The research literature was consulted in the construction of possible interview questions for the semi-structured interviews. For the sake of efficiency, it was essential that the interviewees received the core questions in advance. If the students were to some extent aware of the questions which were to be central to this work, they would be fairly prepared when they came to the interview sessions, at the same time as the amount of collected data would be
maximized. This preparation is beneficial to both interviewees as well as the interviewer given that due to time limitations there was not be more than one interview session for each group. Furthermore, for follow-up questions email correspondence was used. Open-ended questions were the core of the interviews and if relevant follow-up questions arose during the interview they too were put forward (Hatch, 2002, p. 23). Nevertheless, one has to take into account that solely using interviews as the core source of data collection is risky. It is recommended that the researcher base his or her interview sessions on prior observations such as classroom observation. However, since this research paper is lacking that aspect of the data collection one has to be wary of the effects this may have on the outcome of the study. In other words this paper recognizes that the interviewed students may share opinions which cannot be substantiated. Nonetheless, it grants certain marginal of error since the interviews ensure access to students’ first hand accounts of the studied area (Johansson and Svedner, 2001, p. 28).
Results and analysis

To get a balanced view of the attained data, the results will be presented first, followed by the analysis. The students’ accounts will not be presented individually although certain students’ names will at times be mentioned to highlight individual responses. Due to the chosen interview technique and the fact that the students had the opportunity to consult and support each other, there was obviously no other way to present the data without superfluous repetitiveness. The analytical model for this research will be an interpretive analysis since this approach makes the paper more focused and the attained data more manageable (Hatch, 2002, p. 181). Nonetheless when one is writing a qualitative research paper one is constantly valuing and re-evaluating all aspects of the research paper therefore a qualitative paper is the result of a long series of interpretations. This way the discussion will be well structured at the same time as the core data are exposed (Hatch, 2002, p. 179). Furthermore, the language and some of word choices of the analysis reflect how the students expressed themselves as they discussed the questions.

Presentation of the informants

The first student who will from now on be referred to as Alexandra is 17 years old. Like the rest of the informants she has high expectations on this specific Social science programme. She sees the programme as a gateway to her future profession as a police officer. She is passionate about different sports and when she is asked to classify herself as a reader she said she is the type of student who only reads assignments given to her by her teacher. If she is to read anything it is always school related. The only thing she reads for fun is fashion
magazines. Alexandra finds the schoolwork rather challenging. Alexandra lives with both her parents in a rural town which is located a couple miles south of Malmö.

The second student is Rahman who is a male student who lives with both his parents in downtown Malmö. He considers himself to be an advanced student when it comes to English but he does not consider himself a regular reader and only reads what he has been assigned. But if he had more time he would most definitely read books with more action. Rahman was a diligent reader in his childhood, but currently he is more passionate about his computer and writing. He writes a great deal of short stories and screenplays.

The third student is Maja, a female living in central Malmö. She says she struggles with the English language. Although she reads a great deal of paperback novels in her spare time, they are mostly in Swedish. She prefers to buy her reading materials to borrowing it since the paperback book store is conveniently located near the school. According to Maja, another reason why she buys her material is that she finds the price affordable but also because it takes time before newly released books appear in the libraries. She is not classified as a dyslexic by the school but her reading as well as writing capacity when it comes to the English language are much reduced and for this reason she receives extra tutoring in English.

The fourth informant is a 17-year-old boy who will from now on be referred to as Michael. Michael lives on the outskirts of Malmö. His considers himself an advanced reader of all sorts of literature but does not for several reasons read as much as he used to. He is involved in many after-school activities, and for the time, he is overwhelmed by the demands the school places on him. His cravings for reading are inspired by his mother who reads as he puts it “whatever she gets hold of”. He is optimistic about the future and believes fiction reading will be a hobby he will one day return to.

Oscar is the fifth student and probably the shiest of the lot. He chooses his words carefully and he contributed greatly to the interviews since he was able to connect our conversations to the syllabus. Oscar has not read many novels since secondary school. He has a lot of hobbies to attend to but mainly he focuses on chatting online and socializing with friends. Oscar is the only one amongst these six persons interviewed who was considering another profession than the uniformed services. Whereas the rest had their minds set on becoming police officers and
so on, Oscar entertains the thought of applying to the School of Architecture after completing his secondary school education.

When Sara who is the sixth and last interviewee was asked about her reading habits she said she has never been what is referred to as a passionate reader. She reads what she is assigned and perhaps a couple of fashion magazines now and then. Sara adds that she aims for a higher mark than just a pass grade. For that reason she spends more time on the assigned novels. Since she read *A Child Called It* in class she has found a newly gained appreciation for fiction, more specifically autobiographical novels.

**The students’ thoughts on fiction reading**

All the students enjoyed the available literature listed. Furthermore when they were asked if they had considered why they were to read the assigned novels and short stories they were not able to give a conclusive answer. One student figured it was because the chosen books in general gave a great outlook of the country in question but that they also showed that people from different walks of life could also be found in other countries. Another one agreed but added that it is good to get exposed to characters one can relate to. But in general the students said it is just another way to gain some new knowledge.

Except for Alexandra and Maja, the students did not feel there was any need to *over-invest* in the required reading. All the boys as well as Sara read what they were supposed to read to achieve the required grades. Although Michael because of his hectic schedule tried to plan his reading, Oscar and Rahman had the habit of reading a great part of the novel at the last minute. The boys were steadfast when they were asked about the purpose of fiction reading. They all agreed that although the underlying thought was to improve their analytical skills, spark their imagination and improve their overall English acquisition, it was much more important to just perform enough for the grade they had in mind. According to four of the informants the acquisition becomes secondary to receiving good grades so they tried to invest as little as possible in the required reading.
Sara and Maja clearly stated that they enjoy the fact that they are exposed to a more varied selection of reading material. They also thought it is positive that they have had the opportunity to read novels that they would not have read if it was up to them. They also felt that group discussions, in addition to reading the novels, have made them more imaginative in their writing. According to the girls their willingness to experiment has increased. Maja who is a passionate reader and who receives additional tutoring in the subject says her vocabulary has increased since she started to read more English fiction. Since she works actively on her vocabulary acquisition she feels she has benefited from the reading. Nevertheless Maja was not the only student who spent additional time on the novels.

The students’ thoughts on assessment and available support

The students appreciated the fact that they had the opportunity to pick suitable books. They felt they got sufficient support and they did not feel overwhelmed by the amount of literature they were to read. The weaker students expressed that they felt reassured and more motivated since their teacher had already read all the novels. They were in private recommended suitable books, which they ultimately chose. Furthermore they have had the same teacher in the A course as well as in other languages so they were convinced their teacher knew the type of language they were able to handle and thus accepted the suggested novels with a certain enthusiasm. The more advanced students said since their tutor knew what they could achieve they were not allowed to pick the easier books. Neither did the weaker student associate any negative connotation with the books they were recommended.

The girls in general said they used dictionaries whereas just one boy wrote down names and events he figured would come up in the quotation tests. The other two boys would just read the novels without giving the vocabulary or the abstract background further consideration. Alexandra used online dictionaries to look up words she did not understand whereas Sara said the utmost important object of the assignment was understanding the context and for that reason she did not bother herself with looking up difficult words, unless it was a reoccurring word and she felt it was necessary to the plot.
Furthermore, the students required more in-depth discussion sessions. They would rather explore a certain book thoroughly than read several books and merely scratch the surface. Yet another reason they suggested that additional group discussions should be available was that they wanted to be able to exchange interpretations of the read novels with their peers in a more formal setting. Since English is not their first language, a couple of the students felt they were sometimes lacking the different nuances of the plot, nuances which were more apparent when they read novels in their first language. If they needed a certain situation or chapter explained they would privately seek out their teacher, or they would speak to other pupils who had read the same novel for a quick discussion. In addition the students expressed that other means of assessment would be preferable. A couple of things they suggested were multiple choice questions and presentations. Although they were eager to explore other assessment techniques they felt it was improbable due to time limitations. That is why two of the students stressed that there should at least be a couple of exam-free options available to them throughout the course.

**Students’ thoughts on factors affecting their reading**

Yet another topic that arose during the interview sessions was the fact that the students did not read much, especially English fiction. The main reason they gave for not reading in their spare time was that they felt their second year was much tougher than the previous one. Moreover if they were to maintain a healthy balance in their studies they had to give up certain pastime activities and reading seemed to be the most suitable choice. When the students were asked what can be done to improve the amount of fiction they read in English they had several interesting suggestions. First of all they criticized the fact that audio books were not accessible to them. They all agreed that the visually impaired students, weaker students and dyslectics should be prioritised. However, they suggested all students should have the opportunity to update their mp3 players while they are still in school. If other media were made available to them perhaps they would have had more time for English fiction.
Moreover some of the interviewees expressed that the amount of books available in the school library was rather limited and since the main library is near by they would have appreciated if they every now and then were allowed to pick other novels except the ones on the list. In addition Rahman and Maja said if the reading project their former secondary school had implemented was adopted by their present school their reading would certainly increase. The project mentioned above entailed establishing reading sessions which took place twice a week in which the entire class would for half an hour just sit and read a novel of their choice. During these sessions the students were certain they would not be assessed when they had finished reading their novel, and could for that reason devote themselves to the reading. The students also praised the two weeks of literature reading they had in their initial year. In these two weeks they learned different reading techniques as well as getting acquainted to various writing styles. What they appreciated most about those weeks was the fact that they were allowed to write a great deal. They also enjoyed the fact that the sessions were more about learning and less about performing. They were required to hand in a couple of reviews but for the most part they were just to read and learn ways of broadening their learning.

Analysis of the students’ thoughts on fiction reading

The focus of the available research is not to solely determine the attitudes of fiction readers. Nevertheless since the students’ attitude towards English inevitably sheds some light upon the students’ attitude towards reading fiction, this is an aspect worth studying. The two entities cannot be viewed as two separate entities, detached from one another. The research NU-03 indicates that the students are enthusiastic about the subject (NU-03, 2006, p.86). Nevertheless a majority of the teachers interviewed in Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan believe the students do struggle with their analytical skills which are a major aspect of the B-course. The influence of the subject depends on the type of programme the students are studying. If the students have their future mapped out they tend to trivialise the subject. If they on the other hand intend to pursue higher education they do aim for more than a pass grade in the subject (Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan, 2005, p.68). One very noticeable trait shared by the students interviewed for this paper is although they acknowledge the importance
of the subject there is not much time available to entirely focus on a certain section when many other require your attention. Fiction reading is as it seems on the schedule acting as an independent task amongst many other tasks. Moreover, when such is completed you focus on the next.

The interviewed students are aware of the time they spend on the required fiction and how it affects their overall grade in the subject. The students are informed in advance about the demands of the syllabus and this facilitates the students’ ability to plan ahead (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p. 91). They persistently declare that good grades are their main concern and they share this trait with other students in the research literature (Bommarco, 2006, p. 157). The importance of the grades is also acknowledged in Swedish National Agency for Education’s research (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p. 94). The students interviewed for this paper argue they have reflected upon their performances on many occasions. They even acknowledge that deeper involvement in their own studies is needed. Primarily the boys spent the bare minimum on using the fiction as a means to increase learning. The students seem to have a hard time distinguishing the main function of fiction reading. Four of the interviewed students agreed that they need to pass the English course since a competitive grade point average would enhance their chances of getting accepted to the Police Academy, whereas only two students acknowledge educational benefits of fiction reading. In general Swedish students believe that they benefit or will benefit from their education (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p. 20).

**Analysis of the students’ thoughts on assessment and available support**

The interviewed students stated that they are assessed on their comprehension and for that reason they make sure they have understood what they have read. According to the students the tests consist of two parts. First the students get the opportunity to discuss the books they have read in groups. Once they have read the entire book they are to elaborate on excerpt from the novel to demonstrate that they have read and understood the novel. The received marks are dependent on the depth of their accounts. When asked how the teacher could be certain that the students have understood the read novel, the students argued that
comprehensive answers to the quotation tests are connected to the student’s comprehension of the read text. This method of testing comprehension was also used by the Swedish National Agency for Education to determine the examined students’ top-down and bottom-up comprehension (NU-03, 2006, p.37). However, whereas the Swedish National Agency for Education used open-ended questions in its tests the students interviewed for this paper said that their tests consisted of quotations from the read text.

The students said that they often seek fellow students’ feedback and if the students are unable to provide the desired support they employ the support of the teacher. According to the research, students who do not see each other as competitors support each other and make an effort to advance each other’s educational progress. This aspect of learning is apparent in the research conducted by the national agency (Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan, 2005, p.73). Yet another reason why students discuss the texts is they actually appreciate hearing other students’ interpretation of the plot. Bommarco’s research suggests that students are constantly in search of finding a deeper meaning in texts they have read. The students Bommarco interviewed were captivated by the fact that there could be so many interpretations of the same text. This may surely explain why the students interviewed for this thesis paper are all keen to increase the amount of group discussion sessions (Bommarco, 2006, p. 93).

Guthrie and Wigfield discuss the likelihood of the structure and content of assessment methods discouraging rather than encouraging the students (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2005, p. 188). Tests such as quotations tests could have a negative impact on the students’ willingness to devote themselves entirely to meaningful reading. According to Guthrie and Wigfield there are certain factors which influence students’ feelings towards assessment methods and how well they do on assessments. In addition, the level of motivation that the students express correlates with the text of the test, the student’s goals, the level of difficulty and complexity, and the level of student involvement (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2005, p. 198).
Analysis of Students’ thoughts on factors affecting their reading

According to the students, upper secondary education is a decisive period in their lives and this statement is supported by the fact that the interviewed students felt the need to change many of their previous habits. Students who used to read in their spare time state they have abandoned this habit since their schoolwork demands more and more of their time. This above stated strategy seems to be well-rooted in the mentality of a couple of the upper secondary students interviewed for this thesis paper. It was mainly the male informants who expressed that they felt stressed by their schooling and this is in contrast to the literature in which more girls than boys stated that they experience this specific condition (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p.17). Bommarco’s research also seems to support the fact that some students have a hard time upholding their reading habits once they start upper secondary school. Students suggested that they are overwhelmed by the course load of upper secondary education. The main reason students give for this re-prioritization of their reading habits is thus their lack of time (Bommarco, 2006, p. 154). The existing research suggests that grades, exams and homework are at the core of the stress (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p. 46). To combat the potential problems related to stress the students need support from their surroundings which they obviously receive from their teachers. A great deal of the students interviewed by the Swedish National Agency for Education expressed that they rely a great deal on their teacher’s support (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p.36). This is in accordance with principles of Lpf 94, which states that “the teacher shall stimulate, guide and support pupils and provide special support to pupils with difficulties”.

The students interviewed for this thesis paper suggested they believed they would increase their reading, if there was specific time allocated for literature they have selected on their own account. On the other hand a clear majority of Swedish National Agency for Education’s students expressed that they are satisfied with both textbooks as well as other teaching aids in almost every subject (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p.29). According to Bommarco it is important that the students are able to bring their own culture into the classroom by selecting their own reading material (Bommarco, 2006, p. 220).

The method of second language teaching the students suggested is according to Renandya and Jacobs commonly known as extensive reading (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 295).
Extensive reading, in which the content of the read material is the central part of the exercise, even more than the language of the read material, is to expose the students to a great deal of meaningful learning, hence improving their language acquisition. The apprehension the teacher may feel about this approach is caused by the fact they are pressured to adhere to the syllabus and realize the goals set by the school and the national agency of education. Furthermore, according to some research, this method seems to benefit highly motivated students more than those less motivated (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p. 296).

Nevertheless, lack of motivation seems to be a characteristic the interviewed students share with their peers. Students who study the Child-Care and Leisure programme who were interviewed in the national evaluation Standardized national test in English language confirm this problem (Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan, 2005, p. 48). Some of the students who participated in the Swedish National Agency for Education’s research lacked motivation for the subject. According to the research literature students of the Nature Science programme often consider education a way of attaining competitive grades for higher education and do not see it as the goal (Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan, 2005, p.69). This is an attitude shared by a couple of the students interviewed for this paper. Mainly the boys express a causal attitude towards the assigned literature. They read the novels because it is compulsory. Even though the interviewed students expressed a certain lack of motivation they all aspire to pursuing higher education just like their peers in the research paper (Attityder till skolan, 2006, p. 102).
Discussion and conclusions

Discussion

There is not much research literature concerning Swedish upper secondary school students’ thoughts on English fiction. What this research paper ultimately highlights is the need for more in-depth research on students’ thoughts on fiction, more specifically English fiction in classroom settings. Although Bommarco’s research did shed some light into the subject it was not enough. That is the reason why sections of the Swedish National Agency for Education’s three studies NU-03, Attityder till skolan and Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan had to be utilized. These three studies in combination with Bommarco’s dissertation gave a more adequate insight into the subject matter. Even though Bommarco researched a completely different subject her research did clarify general and highly critical concerns students expressed both in the interviews for this paper as well as in the interviews conducted by the National Agency for Education. In her dissertation Bommarco is determined to increase our understanding of the process which reading a novel entails. Although it was not covered in this research her study of how understanding is mirrored in students’ written work is worth mentioning. The research paper also delivered insights into how students support each other in their education. Although NU-03 merely examined secondary school students’ perceptions, the results of that research expressed a number of standard characteristics also evident in this examined upper secondary environment, most notably the students’ appreciation of the subject. Furthermore, the interviewed students in Nationella prov i gymnasieskolan were divided along programme lines as well as aptitude, whereas this fiction study had only one classification which entails grouping the students after aptitude.

In regards to the question concerning the role of fiction in their language learning the interviewed students shared very insightful information which was valuable to this thesis paper. According to Attityder till skolan, girls are more likely to feel overwhelmed by the course load. Yet according to the informants interviewed for this specific research the boys were the ones who highlighted stress as a contributing factor to their casual attitude towards
assigned fiction. Furthermore this also explains why the students suggested that assessment should not be the aim of reading fiction. A clear majority of the interviewed students felt they only read to meet certain criteria and did not in any way contemplate further on the read fiction after they have passed the exams. According to the research literature this is a characteristic they seem to share with students who attend other programmes, most specifically practical ones. Perhaps an explanation for this casual stance towards reading is rooted in the culture of these kinds of programmes in which the practical subjects are preferred to the theoretical subjects. After all the interviewed students invest a great deal in their other subjects and seem goal oriented. According to the research literature this goal oriented behaviour is a distinctive feature of vocational training courses and programmes and it is refreshing to see this trait in a Social Science programme.

In regards to the question concerning what changes, if any, they would make in regards to how fiction is used in the classroom, the thoughts they disclosed are well reasoned. The interviewed students were able to discuss alternative routes to assessment, and other aspects of the education they figured required a transformation. For example they preferred group discussions to the quotation test, and given that new ideas and knowledge may be created in interactive situations this is an aspect of fiction reading teachers should embrace more often (Bommarco, 2006, p. 50). Furthermore, the students interviewed for this thesis paper appreciate the varied fiction and as previously mentioned the entire school dedicated the initial weeks of upper secondary lessons to fiction reading and providing a solid foundation for such an activity. The students were to pick suitable books and regulate their learning in an appropriate manner. However by their second year the advanced students had abandoned one of the supreme elements of the taught strategies, organizing a well functioning reading schedule. A couple of the students even admitted they merely read the literature from cover to cover to afterwards regurgitate the material which they clearly forgot as soon as they had passed the examination which for most parts consisted of participating actively in one or at the most two group discussions, and successfully completing the quotations on the quotation tests. However if the reading weeks they had during their first year were to expand to their second year perhaps it would be feasible to inspire the students to invest more effort in their reading.
The students argued the repetitiveness of the assessment methods is the underlying cause to their lack of motivation. Considering the amount of fiction the teacher has to take in it is difficult to attend to every single one of the students’ needs. Nonetheless the students do agree that they are pleased with the support they get from their tutor. The informants mentioned that they were comfortable with the novels they were recommended as well as the support they received. However a suitable approach to addressing the concerns the students voiced would have been initiating more discussions concerning what changes can be made to advance the students’ time management and scheduling predicament, to the extent they no longer feel overwhelmed by grades, exams and homework. Techniques and strategies which lead to undisturbed learning are required.

**Conclusions**

The question of how the teachers approach the lack of motivation towards fiction reading on the whole is addressed by enabling the students to support one another more extensively. The students in the research literature as well as the informants interviewed for this thesis paper asked for more in-depth discussions. The informants are positive in regards to the amount of support they receive from their tutor yet it could be argued that since students in general do seek support from each other this is an area which could be explored even further. Swedish upper secondary schools seem determined to find niched programmes appealing to certain types of students yet the students are required to read the core subjects in the same manner. At the present we have a scenario in which the students are diligent about certain aspects of their education at the same time as other aspects are only seen as necessary measures to acquire the required grades. To further the appeal of fiction reading, the reading itself needs to be incorporated more closely into the students’ overall education. Fiction serves as an incredible resource with extraordinary potential. It is good to educate students to take more responsibility but when the students argue that they are overwhelmed perhaps something is off concerning the distribution for such responsibility. The classroom could serve as the primary setting of the read fiction, but on the other hand are we then letting apathy trump hard work?
The informants’ accounts function as the foundation of the examined data, hence the personal analysis which is the trademark of this paper. The youngsters were initially perplexed when they were offered the opportunity to share their view on their education, but after some considerations they were able to express aspects of fiction reading which they had some concerns about, while they showed the same forwardness in regards to praising the versatile literature they encountered during their reading. There is no bigger sense of accomplishment than when a student finds the type of literature which captivates his or her interest. Tales about people and their interactions with other people enhance students’ social awareness but also empathy towards other cultures and its people. The worlds authors create take the reader from his or hers compartmentalised environment to a completely different and at times enchanting ones. In these worlds one is required to adopt a different point of view, which itself is quite refreshing. At the same time as the reader acquires a new set of eyes he or she is given the necessary tools to express these new experiences. For that reason the students should be given the opportunity to examine the literature they are assigned more thoroughly. The educator should take this prime opportunity to let the students immerse themselves into different linguistic worlds to unleash their creativity, and broaden their writing abilities. Furthermore it is important for educators to have knowledge of students’ thoughts and perceptions of the assigned fiction in order to take advantage of its versatility and to be better equipped to handle its teaching.
References:


Appendix

Interview questions

What is your impression of the assigned literature?
What is the purpose of the assigned literature?
What sort of books are you assigned?
How do you get about reading an assigned novel, what aid do you use?
What kind of support/aid do you receive?
How are you assessed on the read Novels?
Do you read in your spare time?
What kind of books do you enjoy reading?
What, if anything, would you change about fiction reading in classroom settings?