The use of popular and digital culture to facilitate literacy learning

Avhandling av populär- och digital kultur för att underlätta literacy inlärning

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Abstract

This research synthesis investigates the effects that popular culture and new forms of mediation have had on the teaching and learning of English. Further, it examines some key aspects worth consideration when applying these types of texts in an educational context. The English syllabus for upper secondary school advises teachers to make use of the outside world for resources, and teach the students how to access, gather, analyze and use information found in different types of texts. After initial struggles, due to teachers’ reluctance, popular culture and modern media has found its way in to most classrooms and studies have shown different effects that the introduction of these texts have had on teaching and learning of English. Firstly, there has been a shift in how many teachers approach texts by letting students take more responsibility by participating in the selection process of different texts. Moreover, some studies have shown the effects popular culture and digital media have had on the acquisition of literacy skills. Study results suggest that primarily, students critical skills have developed, and that “out of school literacies” have helped students develop more traditional literacy skills such as reading and writing. However, this research synthesis concludes by saying that more research measuring the acquisition of traditional English using popular culture and digital media skills over longer periods of time involving more students would allow one to answer more accurately what effects they have had.

Keywords: popular culture, popular media, digital media, literacy, critical media literacy, identity, motivation, technology.
# Table of contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 7  
2. Purpose and Research Questions ........................................................................................................ 8 
3. Literature review .................................................................................................................................... 9 
   3.1 Background ....................................................................................................................................... 9 
   3.2 Curriculum ..................................................................................................................................... 11 
   3.3 Literacy .......................................................................................................................................... 12 
4. Method .................................................................................................................................................. 14 
   4.1 Collection of data ............................................................................................................................ 15 
      4.1.1 Search process and inclusion- and exclusion criteria ............................................................... 15 
   4.2 Limitations of a research synthesis ................................................................................................. 16 
5. Results .................................................................................................................................................. 18 
   5.1 Bridging the gap between students personal life and the classroom ............................................. 18 
   5.2 Shift in how to approach texts and literacy in the classroom ....................................................... 20 
   5.3 Effects on teaching and learning .................................................................................................... 22 
   5.4 Aspects to consider in an educational context ............................................................................... 26 
6. Discussion & Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 31 
References .................................................................................................................................................. 34
1. Introduction

Through the many forms of popular culture and the channels it travels through in today’s modern and globalized society, students are constantly exposed to English. In his editorial Motivating the Millennials in the Science teacher (2011), Steve Metz claims that this could be seen as a problem since teachers today find themselves high and dry when it comes to competing with the overflow of sensory experiences students encounter outside the classroom, and the only way to deal with this is to embrace the situation and make use of popular culture in the classroom. This degree project, in form of a research synthesis investigates the potential of using popular culture and other non-traditional texts aided by the use of technology to facilitate literacy learning. This research synthesis will also, through contrasting and summarizing previous research, investigate efforts of using popular culture as a stimulus to boost motivation amongst students. Cheung (2001) suggests that popular culture brings relevance into the life of students since they need to identify themselves with something and often turn towards popular culture. Furthermore, there is only so much time devoted to lesson time, and therefore trying to motivate students with a static ‘teacher talk, students listen’ approach might be a waste of time and opportunity. Instead, by using popular culture that appeals to students, teachers can motivate students to become responsible and active learners according to Cheung (2001). Along with popular culture, other non-traditional texts, such as instructional videos and streamed lectures today reach us through technology, for example YouTube and other platforms supported by the internet (Tucker & Courts, 2010). The overarching question of relevance to teaching, and English language teaching in particular, is whether technology truly enhances learning.
2. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research synthesis is to explore the effects popular culture and new forms of mediation have had on teaching and learning, both the way in which we teach and learn, and the results, in form of new learning and potential implication. To scaffold my purpose, I have composed two research questions:

1. How has the use of popular culture texts and new forms of mediation affected the practice of language teaching and learning?
2. What are some of the key aspects to consider when using these types of texts in an educational context?
3. Literature review

Along with a brief background presentation of theories, this section will discuss and define some of the key concepts used in this research synthesis to inform the reader why a research like this might be relevant and interesting to follow up on.

3.1 Background

Popular culture’s inclusion within the classroom has had to face some opposition. Teachers have expressed their outright distaste of popular- and digitally mediated culture texts due to the fact that they are seen as low culture and transient compared to the literacy works within the ranges of high culture (Marsh & Millard, 2000).

It is not only in the context of education where popular culture has struggled for recognition, but also on a much larger stage. Historically popular culture has had to fight against a reputation of being insubstantial and the complete opposite of art which is substantial (Pattie, 2013). However, Pattie (2013) claims that the view of popular culture is changing and through its popularity it is becoming more substantial. For instance, TV-series, such as Game of Thrones, have their own platforms in terms of an official website, different blogs, twitter, YouTube and fan based forums etc. All this adds to the substantiality and accessibility, which consequently makes it more valid to use like any other form of text (Pattie, 2013).

Moreover, Marsh and Millard (2002) claim that, even though popular culture has become more substantial, because of the period in which we live in is in a rapid transition from linear print-based and page bound culture, to screen based and hyper linked communication, the reluctance among some teachers to make use of newer types of texts are becoming more evident. This could be because of anxiousness among those who feel that they cannot keep up with the change, and therefore stick to their products of conventional literacy which have served them well over the years, a literacy that according to them has greater currency (ibid.)
What is certain, is that children today are born into a digital world and exposed to electronically mediated popular culture texts and become familiar with them seemingly without any difficulties. By introducing popular culture as texts, teachers may find themselves working with a currency that is stronger than they would if they were to introduce more conventional static texts which the students are out of touch with (Marsh & Millard, 2002).

The research literature reviewed in this synthesis deals with different aspects and perspectives of non-traditional texts, everything from motivation and enhanced learning due to the technology that allows us to access these texts, to potential hazards using non-traditional texts such as popular culture. There is therefore a need to summarize and contrast this literature in the shape of this research synthesis in an effort to present how non-traditional texts such as popular culture have affected teaching and learning.

Moreover, what this research synthesis is looking at is not only the different non-traditional texts being used, but also how they are accessed and read. As mentioned in the introduction, Steve Metz (2011) claims that the teacher needs to take advantage of the sensory experiences that students today encounter. Today’s students are online constantly and are deemed to be experts within the area of technology and Internet, which allows them to access popular culture continuously. This could affect the teaching and learning environment, since it is claimed that technology enhanced learner environments promote cooperation, self-efficacy and relevance (Tucker & Courts, 2010). Furthermore, the use of popular culture texts serves as an excellent opportunity to teach students how to analyze a certain TV-show or a website (Hobbs, 2011).

In his study, Savage (2008) argues that teachers who don’t connect and embrace popular culture in the classroom run the risk of falling out of touch with the realities of youth popular culture. Interviewed students from his study claim that they need to be able to relate to a text for it to be interesting. The pressing issue seems to be that even though some teachers try to use non-traditional texts such as popular culture, they are still not relevant enough. The reality is that in an age where students are extremely knowledgeable when it comes to technology and popular texts, the teachers who wish to stay relevant must do what they can to keep up with the students’ experiences outside the classroom, which could easily end in failure. Rather than trying to pin point certain texts for the students to read, teachers will benefit from teaching the students about critical thinking and subjectivity instead of trying to hunt down the texts themselves (Savage, 2008.)

These ideas should prove to be equally relevant in the Swedish classroom, because if the
majority of the popular culture texts the students encounter are in English, which is likely, there is much room for teaching and analyzing the language, and discourse aspects of these sources along with the analysis of these texts.

3.2 Curriculum

Skolverket (2014) states that the knowledge of English enhances students’ opportunities to participate in social and cultural contexts. Subsequently, students should be given the opportunity to make use of different kinds of media to interact with the English language. If we assume that young student’s social and cultural contexts are in fact intertwined with the very same society that is going through the transition from page-bound culture to hyperlinked, then texts from the same context would be appropriate to use in the classroom of English learners. Skolverket (2014) fortifies this argument by saying that teachers should make use of the outside world for resources, and teach the students how to access, gather, analyze and use information found in different types of texts.

Moreover, the overall goals and guidelines of Skolverket’s curriculum for the upper secondary school, suggests that it is the responsibility of the school to ensure that students can use “non-fiction, fiction and other forms of culture as a source of knowledge, insight and pleasure” (Skolverket, 2013, p.8.), as well as teach the students how to use their knowledge as tools to assess, and critically examine statements, analyze and formulate and solve problems.

According to the curriculum (Skolverket, 2013), students must be given opportunities to influence their education, by being encouraged by the school and teachers to actively take part to develop methods that within the framework of education help students learning.

Teachers should as a first step see students as willing and able to take personal responsibility for their learning. Moreover, it is up to the teacher to encourage students to find their voices by ensuring students that they have real influence over the working methods and content of their education. This can be achieved by introducing different working methods and forms of content together with including the students to plan and evaluate the education in an effort to overcome any potential difficulties students may have expressing their views (ibid., 2013).

In other words, the use of popular culture texts could be used as a working method to
help students who are struggling to express themselves to take responsibility for their learning by reading into the texts with content which speak to them, and ultimately help to speak (or write, for that matter) for them.

3.3 Literacy

To define the term literacy as something unanimous has proven difficult as there are more than one context where literacy is being used. One would not be wrong to describe literacy as the ability to read and to write. However, you would not be speaking the entire truth either. To understand literacy it helps to be aware of terms such multiliteracy and critical literacy. Literacy not only concerns your ability to decode words on a paper or screen, but also visuals and sounds and much more. It is about putting these skills together and to work to be able to read the world, Paulo Frerie cited by Perry (2012) describes literacy thus:

To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands; it is to communicate graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables – lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context. (p. 60)

Critical media literacy, a related concept relevant to the goals of the Swedish national curriculum is also used differently in different contexts (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). In line with the context of this synthesis however, critical media literacy refers to the ability to reflect on the pleasures derived from popular culture in its different forms, in other words, the analysis of visual and audio texts, both printed and non-printed.

According to Perry (2012), “education must be reformed in such a way that encourages situated practice for critical understanding” (p. 59). Alvermann and Hagood (2000) have found that the discourse of schooling have struggled to incorporate critical media literacy as a regular component of the curriculum. When drawing on observations made by researchers prior to their article, they say:
the discourse of school tends to keep the curricula unproblematic and free from explorations that incorporate varying perspectives and a range of emotions by teaching the official knowledge accepted by the dominant culture (p. 200).

However, as discussed earlier, the Swedish curriculum seem to incorporate just that aspect, giving the teachers ample of opportunities to work with these methods.
4. Method

For this degree project I have chosen to conduct a research synthesis in an effort to accumulate as much relevant and recent research as possible on the topic of popular culture texts and new forms of mediation used in teaching. Furthermore, the object of a research synthesis is to organize the chosen research, summarize it, and compares the different sources against each other, in a systematic fashion (Ortega, 2010) to highlight the different focuses, limitations and conclusions to gather as much multifaceted research needed to answer the research questions. The research done on the use of popular culture texts in a learning environment is either extensive or limited, depending on how you view it. Just by searching for “popular culture” and teaching you will find that the findings are somewhat limited. Therefore, it is beneficial to deconstruct the terms non-traditional texts and popular culture and search for specific type of texts. What you end up with us an array of different research done on different aspects of non-traditional texts and popular culture. However, does it not pose as a threat for your synthesis to include research that is different and possibly too far away from each other? The answer to that question would be both yes, and no. As Ortega (2010) puts it, if we only want to understand apples, there is no need to examine oranges since it is irrelevant in connection to our research question. However, if we want to understand the whole concept of fruit, to be able to answer a certain question, then the relevance of examining both apples and oranges along with other fruit is crucial to answer your question successfully. What was included and excluded in criteria of the process of data gathering will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section of this research synthesis.

Finally, a research synthesis serves as a comprehensible and accessible source of information on a certain topic.
4.1 Collection of data

The pursuit of relevant research for this research synthesis was mainly conducted digitally via electronic databases, in particular Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) via EBSCO and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), as well as Google Scholar. Moreover, another technique applied was to look for research within the research found, either by scouting the reference list in a particular research paper or by using databases to find out what studies have been cited, or by what other studies a current study is cited by.

4.1.1 Search process and inclusion- and exclusion criteria

By entering “Popular Culture” in the search field of ERIC one ends up with 3,192 studies which blatantly implies that there is a need for a more refined search. One obvious way to do this is to add phrases or terms in your search field. In this particular search, “literacy” and “English” and “technology” were added, which consequently limited the search results to 115 studies. Moreover, one needs to mark out personal inclusion and exclusion criteria so that all the research you include in your synthesis are somewhat aligned with each other and are relevant for the purpose of your study (Ortega, 2010). Below my inclusion and exclusion criteria are listed. Each study had to include one or several points of the inclusion criteria to be considered in this research synthesis, whereas research which matched one or more of the exclusion criteria were omitted.

Inclusion criteria:

- Focus on Popular culture
- Focus on technology (electronic mediation)
- Focus on teaching methods
- Focus on potential benefits using these methods
- Focus on critical literacy
- Scholarly journal
Exclusion criteria:

- Focus on other subjects than language learning
- Research older than 15 years
- Full text unavailable
- Dissertation/theses

To further trim down the findings in ERIC, texts that were published between 1999 and 2014 were the only ones considered. Out of these 37 remaining texts, descriptors and abstracts were studied to make sure that the focus of the different articles or books were set up in a way to facilitate the quest of this research synthesis. Only 3 articles from this particular search were deemed relevant for this study.

After applying the same criteria and search phrases in LLBA, there were a small, but interesting array of texts presented, however many of them were dissertations and disregarded for their length and, in this particular case, lack of credibility (note that the quality of these dissertations are not dismissed) as only scholarly journals and books are considered in this research synthesis. In the end, 2 journals were gathered from LLBA.

The remaining texts included in this research synthesis have been acquired by locating works cited in the articles found by entering either the title or the name of the author of the relevant studies. 1 was found through Google Scholar, and the rest through ERIC, LLBA and Summon, through this searches a total of 15 sources were used to make up the results section.

4.2 Limitations of a research synthesis

This being a research synthesis, it cannot give an answer to a certain research problem, since it is relying on previous research as informants, and the information is being interpreted in a certain light by the synthesist (Ortega, 2010). What it can do, is to answer a question here and now. However, questions along with information evolve
over time. Findings in studies, as all knowledge will be reevaluated and recalibrated as history and consciousness change, according to Ortega (2010).
5. Results

In this chapter, the findings from the different studies will be presented and summarized, interpreted contrasted as well as connected with each other under different headings that will determine the different themes in this section. In the following three sections, I explore the research with respect to my first research question: How has the use of popular culture texts and new forms of mediation affected the practice of language teaching and learning, which revealed the following themes.

5.1 Bridging the gap between students’ personal life and the classroom

Consider the evolving globalized society where most things are going from local to global. Borders are reduced to lines on paper as we travel more freely, currencies merge into to the same and culture do the same. Who and what we define ourselves by may not be at our doorstep, but it is accessible through just a short trip with a modern mode of transportation or by the click of a mouse, or swipe of a finger.

Now, consider the classroom, it is going through the same transition as the world outside the classroom walls. Gone are the days where the only currency available for students were book and text types that may not, regardless of the quality of these text types, speak to the students (Marsh & Millard, 2002).

Evans (2012) suggests that, it could lead to literacy improvement among the students if the teacher regularly re-examines the curriculum to find values and aims that link the demands of the curriculum with students’ personal interests and literacies.

Evans (2012) goes on to claim that children and teenagers today seek to be powerful in as many areas as possible; subsequently it is crucial for teachers to encourage multiple competencies and literacies in such areas as technological gadgetry and
popular culture and to see all forms of expression and interaction in efforts to read the modern world and to make use of these literacies within the classroom and to help develop them further.

Cheung (2001) argues that the integration of popular culture in the classroom can build a valuable bridge between informal and formal learning. When asking how someone acquires expertise in a particular field, Chueng looked at a skilful computer gaming student and came to the conclusion, through self-learning in the form of practice. He continues, that students will use their time and energy to learn anything they want, an amount of time that a teacher might not have at his or her disposal. Therefore, the key seems to be to instil some sort of relevance or motivational aspects in the teaching methods, by trying to connect the learning environment with personal interests in popular culture, as Evans (2012) also suggests.

According to Cheung (2001), students need goals and a sense of relevancy for them to be motivated, a motivation that would result in students actively wanting to learn and taking the time to do so. It is the teacher’s task to engage the students in activities where the students look at the learning materials in search of meaning and importance, by using popular culture that appeal to the students makes the activity a pleasurable and activity-oriented learning experience. Moreover, when teachers make use of popular culture that is familiar to the students, it will create a more relaxed learning environment since students will find it easier to follow the instructions in connection to the learning material, furthermore it increases the willingness to participate and students are prone to discuss and argue about a certain topic and use English in an authentic and realistic way when the learning material is something they can relate to (ibid).

Studies have shown the effects of children’s encounters with popular culture texts before starting school. Most of the children when they start school recognize letters and words, and as much as two thirds of them, recognize know how to deal with them in forms of writing their own words and reading sentences as a result. It is thought that heroes from films, computer games and children’s literature have inspired children to read and write on their own, making the transition into school smoother (Liberg, 2010).

In her study, Seven children learn to read and write, family life and popular culture in contact with preschool and primary school, Fast (2007) was surprised by the findings of how experiences from popular culture before starting school had prepared them so well for text oriented activities. She also found it to be evident that most children were able to handle range of symbolic systems, not only writing. One explanation (of many)
behind this urge to engage in popular culture seemed to be endless joy connected with popular culture in its many forms. The ability to handle symbolic systems allows children to interact with each other, telling stories, describing pictures, TV-shows or toys. It demands a type of literacy to be able to separate sport cards from other collector cards and tell the difference between two shows on TV.

5.2 Shift in how to approach texts and literacy in the classroom

The relations between teachers and students in school are gradually changing from a dichotomous structure to a more unbranched entity. Where teachers have been thought of as active knowledge organizers and knowledge givers and students as knowledge takers (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Teachers have been restricted by school discourse, and molded to prepare lessons to as effectively as possible, shun, minimize or altogether keep out anything that address the mess that comes from outside the classroom which is not viewed as intellectual knowledge. Alvermann and Hagood (2000) found that, even though school discourses have not legitimated students multiliteracies that have been perfected outside school, students have still been bringing these literacies to school, however they have been diffused and silenced.

The many forms literacies accessed through popular culture and media provides students with cultural power, and instead of ignoring the cultural power and knowledge that the students possess, the school should thrive to be the very hub where teacher together with students develop their own methods for exploring literacies acquired both outside and inside the classroom. Luke and Luke are cited by Alvermann and Hagood (2000):

Unless education begins a similar reconstruction of its own discourses and assumptions about knowledge, practice and identity, then schoolings in postmodern conditions run the risk of transmitting simulated competencies to nonexistent subjects. (P. 201)
Assuming that critical media literacy have today worked its way in to most curriculums as in Sweden (Skolverket, 2013) school discourses are changing and teachers are now encouraged to engage students in critical media literacy drawing from their experiences outside of school.

Thus, the question of what the critical analysis of a text should entail and how students are engaged remains. Through their research, Alvermann and Hagood (2000) have found these questions to serve as good springboards to the understanding of a text and the world behind it:

- Who (and what) does this text address through its words, images and sounds?
- Who is absent in this text and what might explain that absence?
- Whose interests are served in this text?
- How am I positioned by it?

The above questions suggests that the analysis of a text does not solely revolve around the text itself, but also around the audience (viewer, reader, listener) that views the text. A text is unlikely to carry meaning that is the same to everyone. On the contrary, it is the relationship between the text and the identity and experiences of the audience that conveys meaning.

As mentioned earlier, students run the risk of being diffused in school when their “outside literacies” are not considered and valued in the classroom. In Silencing the everyday experiences of youth? Deconstructing issues of subjectivity and popular/corporate culture in the English classroom, Glenn Savage (2008) argues that the failure of instilling critical media literacy prevent opportunities for students to adopt objectivities as the powers of popular culture discourse are strong.

It all may sound very nice to be able to and- be encouraged to utilize the expertise in form of students’ multiliteracies. If the students are so are so knowledgeable when it comes to popular culture, the teacher can sit back and just relax while the students do all the work. If the students are more active and motivated because of knowledge and goal oriented tasks, then it allows thee teacher to be less active it would seem. This is not the case however, rather the contrary, if you consider some of the statements made by the interviewed students in Savage’s (2008) study it is required that the teacher becomes even more active to make sure that they are up to speed and date, to be able to scaffold the students engagement in critical analysis of popular culture:
we need to know more about it and the effect that it has on people and on the society because it does have a future effect and people really need to know about it otherwise it becomes vague ... it’s good to hear an adult’s perspective rather than ours all the time. We need teachers who are excited about these things as well, but who are able to help us read into them and think more about them. (“Erica”, in Savage, p. 61)

Another student makes it even clearer that critical media literacy is achieved through the union of teachers and students:

Oh yeah when you’re teaching pop you’ve gotta be involved, like to teach that stuff you’ve got to be up-to-date so you know more than what the students know about it so they learn as well, otherwise the kids will be teaching the teachers. (“Chris”, in Savage, p. 61)

In her Article Popular Culture:The New LiteracyChallenge for EnglishTeachers, Page (2012) supports the above and draws on research that have found that adolescents struggle to negotiate the reliability of popular culture and the messages it conveys, sometimes not even questioning the validity of the source. This further emphasizes the need of teacher guidance in form of teachers that are active and well read on the matter when teaching and instructing media literacy.

### 5.3 Effects on teaching and learning

Hobbs and Frost (2003) carried out a yearlong research measuring the acquisition of critical media literacy skills. Results showed that a treatment group that was given media literacy instruction compared to a control group that was not, surpassed the latter in identifying the blurred, complex information presented varied types of popular media, as well as construction techniques.

The questions mentioned in the previous chapter which Alvermann and Hagood (2000) suggested as very good for understanding of texts are very much aligned with
the critical-thinking skills in relation to print and nonprint texts that Hobbs and Frost (2003) pinpoint: (a) identifying message design and construction techniques, (b) recognizing how authors express specific values and points of view, (c) comparing and contrasting messages with similar content, (d) noticing when information is omitted from a message, and (e) identifying and author’s purpose and target audience (p. 351).

Mastering these skills is dependent on a “cognitive apprenticeship” between student and teacher who emphasize engagement in a process of active investigation to uncover meaning making messages in everyday day texts deriving from popular culture and other media, as you gradually acquire the above mentioned skills. Using texts that students have prior knowledge or experience of can help students to master the skills more efficiently (Hobbs & Frost, 2003).

Even though researchers have recognized the interconnectedness between the skills, the research of Hobbs & Frost (2003) have for the sake of precision separated the skills that demonstrate comprehension, those that demonstrate writing skills and those who demonstrate skills of message analysis when measuring the development of the skills. The development of the media literacy skills were measured like the following:

Comprehension skills were measured after exposure to each message through a paper-and-pencil response to open-ended questions. Writing skills were measured by coding a sample of open-ended response texts for word count, holistic writing quality, and the number of spelling and usage errors. Analysis skills were measured after exposure to each message with use of paper-and-pencil measures with open-ended and checklist items to determine students’ ability to identify purpose, target audience, construction techniques, values, point of view, omitted information and comparison contrast. (p. 340)

Widespread perceptions among educators that media literacy instruction does not match the outcomes in terms of reaching academic goals set in the curriculum as literature-based instruction are not validated by this research and its results. Rather the opposite, as the research proves development of not only comprehension and critical-thinking skills, but also writing skills (Hobbs & Frost, 2003). The results implies that teachers of
English should be encouraged in using the wide range of popular media as the study show how the incorporation of popular culture and media in classroom activities help to develop the skills discussed above (a-e).

Further, Hughes and Robertson (2010) found in their case study that the use of digital media to promote multiliteracies could act in way to level the playing field in the classroom. When interviewing a teacher after observing a series of English lessons, the teacher explained how she had been unsure of a certain student’s potential prior to a project where students were to compose digital poems using video and (or) photos. The student Brian (pseudonym) was shy, reluctant to engage in class and group work. However, to the teacher’s surprise, Brian was the first one to complete the assignment, handing it in on a Monday having worked on it over the weekend. With the use of out-of-school literacies put in to practice in a pedagogic way, Brian produced a powerful piece demonstrating a wide range of literacies. This supports the claim of Cheung (2001) that when students are faced with for them – relevant and goal oriented activities - they will take the time to complete them. Moreover, by encouraging multiple literacies, the wide range of how different students are learning, are accommodated (Hughes & Robertson 2010). Evidence of empowerment from using digital media is presented in their study, creating space for students to engage in critical literacy and moving from reticence to critical awareness and the shaping opinions and identities.

Of the several texts examined in the case study, many of them were found to be good examples of identity texts, as the texts incorporated all three components that are recognized as important for English language learners when learning new literacies, these three components were described as: literacy engagement, cognitive engagement and identity investment.

When on the subject of identity, a recent study explains the issue of social isolation, something that students in general, and nonnative English language learners (ELL) in particular can experience. In her study, Li (2012) illustrates how a young ELL enrolled in school in the United States after recently have moved from Thailand, struggled to read, speak and especially write in English. Of course, being from another country, this tends to be natural, but the struggle was also down to the student failing to identify, both with classmates, and their interests in the new country and what was being taught in school due to her lack of confidence in English, as explained by the students in an interview. However, after befriending a Vietnamese girl in class, the young ELL was introduced to popular culture in the form of manga accompanied by online fan
communities. After falling in love with Manga, the student rapidly changed her attitude towards speaking and writing. Li (2012) describes how the student went from being a struggling ELL student to an accomplished writer of fiction within two years. When comparing the first interview conducted by the researcher with a second one two years later, the differences were blatant, not only had the student improved her English skills, but she had found something that she identified herself with.

According to Li (2012) the progress of this young student highlights the importance of supporters (fellow students, teachers or members of online communities) and learners working in union together with involvement media technologies and popular culture for English language learners’ development. Her story suggests, according to Li, that “second language learning is a dynamic social process that involves complex social relationships that learners form with others as they engage in literacy activities” (Li, 2012 p. 315).

Teachers are today encouraged to create the same participatory culture within the classroom that exists online. This in efforts to foster and nurture ELLs’ skills and development through discussion and feedback from peers and teacher (Li, 2012).

Before moving on, there is a need to briefly summarize what has been dealt with in the result part up to this point to provide an answer to the first research question stated in this research synthesis.

The use of popular culture and other forms of mediation have now, not seamlessly however, moved its way into most classrooms. The effects of this have been many. One way of seeing it, is that the students have finally been introduced and welcomed to the learning environment to a greater extent. What is meant by this is that with the introduction of popular culture, teenager’s identities are not only taken seriously, but also used as a springboard dive into a deep pool of knowledge, opinions and opportunities. Instead of students being knowledge takers in a context where the teacher is knowledge giver, they are now together knowledge shapers, and become so by investing their identity and engaging cognitively and critically.

The emphasis must be on critical awareness due to the almost effortless accessibility of texts in an increasingly digitalized world with a never ending surge of texts in popular media.

What we learn is not only shaped by what we see, but how we see it based on what we already know and think. Instead of disregarding the multiliteracies that students possess, school is now becoming the very heart where these literacies are treasured, and
taken advantage of. Instead of being afraid out these out-of-school literacies, speaking metaphorically, school should and (or) could represent an eagle’s nest, and teachers, represent proud but critical mothers of student birds who are flapping their wings in the world. In the nest, skills should be refined and then students should be encouraged to soar, trying out their techniques, only to come back and share what they have learnt in exchange for further feedback and directions.

The way in which the use of popular culture and media promotes different literacies have allowed students flourish (Hughes & Robertson, 2010) by compensating weaker skills with stronger ones. Further, the teaching of critical literacy and use of digital media have been proved to shone many other English arts skills, such as writing and reading, that may have been in need of improvement (Hobbs & Frost, 2003.)

Lastly, fundamental to teaching with popular culture and forms of mediation is to stay updated and to keep track on what is happening in the now digital sphere that is popular culture, and actively taking interest in the students’ lives to prevent from falling out of touch with the realities of students worlds (Savage, 2008). Teaching with popular culture could work against the teacher if he or she does not stay ahead, or at least on par with students’ on what you are teaching. This leads the synthesis into the next theme.

5.4 Aspects to consider in an educational context

The second research question of this project reads as followed: What are some the key aspects to consider when using these types of texts in an educational context? What needs to be considered is naturally context bound and will differ depending on the environment and people involved. However, to answer this question, I will look to three of the arguably most revered and distinguished researchers in the field, Alvermann together with Xu (2003), Millard (2003) and Hobbs (2011) and what they have found to be key aspects to consider when teaching critical literacy using popular culture and digital media.

Alvermann and Xu (2003) explain that a natural first step to take as a teacher would be to consider yourself and your own interests and engagement in popular culture. Only then can you begin to appreciate what appeal popular culture might have to the students. One way of doing this, is described through a survey, undertaken by both the teacher
and the students in an effort to map out the teachers experiences with popular culture on a daily basis as well as prior knowledge of the students’ popular culture interests before considering the students interests to see how the teachers’ assumptions match what the students really say. An example from the article describes how a teacher shared her experiences with the class showcasing the difference between her and her students experiences expressing a genuine interest want to learn more about the students’ own experiences and interests, which was met with appreciation among the students.

Once you have collected somewhat of a notion where their interests lie, the next aspect to consider is how out incorporate them into task that promotes learning. This is created by knowing the students’ needs (Alvermann & Xu, 2003). The researchers draw on another example from a class where students had experienced reading and writing difficulties. The students in the class were in this case very interested in music. The students were asked to look for information about their favorite music groups, discuss song lyrics and compare the different songs of the different groups. Apart from that the teacher witnessed practice of writing and reading, she noted that there was a closer relationship between the students and her, much because the valuation of their interests.

According to Alvermann and Xu (2003) a third key aspect to consider when using popular culture in an educational context is how to relate the pleasures of popular culture critical awareness of real life events.

By connecting students’ interests in popular culture with actual events that happened in a broader context, teachers are developing children’s critical awareness of how the media portrays heroic deeds, both mythically and in reality. They are also encouraging students to use what they now about popular culture to make sense of schoolwork. (p. 153)

The above quote is illustrated by an example of how teacher might encourage students to think beyond the pleasures of reading about, or watching their superheroes by instigating a discussion about real life heroes, such as passengers on the plane, police men, fire fighters and medical workers who saved lives in the events of 9/11.

The process of fusing students’ interests with school requirements and real life is a process which Millard (2003) calls a transformative pedagogy of literacy fusion. Millard describes six aspects that facilitates literacy fusion that would be worth considering when planning to use popular culture and other forms of mediation in
teaching. These aspects are: access, the arena, agency, affordance, appropriateness and accountability and will briefly be described and discussed below.

**Access** – Where the teacher decide what might be worth studying and what might not be in a particular class and how blurred meaning and layers can be accessed. It is also here where the teacher states what will be given space and attention, will music be given as cartoons be given as much space as the Hobbit films? The teacher needs to be aware of the students’ passions and preoccupations to make sure that the different sources welcomed in the activities are sure to result in productivity.

**The Arena** – Here Millard (2003) uses the word arena to determine what is an appropriate context for learning. The teacher must not lose focus of the purpose and the audience when deciding what forms of oral and written presentations are meaningful in connection to the learning outcomes and goals.

**Agency** – Who is allowed to shape meaning? Is the teacher supposed shape meaning for students to comment and reflect on, or should the teacher let students shape meaning, and then reshape them so that they fit in and contribute to particular genre. Millard (2003) suggests that transformative pedagogy allows students to explore their own identities and be given space to persuade or entertain who they want with their own terms. Together with out-of-school literacies, identities and communication of students’ choice must also be incorporated in the classroom.

**Affordance** – Simply requires the teachers to become more adept in understanding the affordances of the different modes of communication and the implications that follow that affect critical awareness.

**Appropriateness** – Here the teacher helps the students to recognize what genres are appropriate for a certain task. What will be more effective for the task? As oppose to the aspect of arena, where the teacher chooses what to include or not, here the teacher initiates a discussion among the students where they can argue for a certain type of source and its practicality for the purpose of a task.

**Accountability** – Successful literacy fusion is reliant on teachers being attentive the
literacies and interests being unpacked in the classroom by the students in an effort to help students to transform what they already know to something they can use in a wider context by becoming more critically aware of meaning, both their own and others (Millard, 2003). One usually says with great powers comes great responsibility. If the power in this case the critical awareness, then the responsibility must be to be able to trace down who is accountable in texts and also account for their own statements and definitions of meaning.

To conclude this section, attention will be turned towards Hobbs (2011) who through many years of research and observations recognizes five essential dimensions of communication competencies. Knowing what these dimensions entail is fundamental to how we learn and communicate today according to Hobbs.

The first dimension to consider is access, simply “how to find, comprehend, and use symbolic resources” (Hobbs, 2011 p. 12). The second dimension is how we analyze the resources and the purpose of its message, by using critical thinking, analyzing point of views, target audience and credibility.

Create, is the third dimension. With the help of confidence in form of self-expression and awareness of purpose, we create content. The fourth dimension is reflection, this is where we consider the impact of media messages and technology tools have on our lives on a daily basis. For example, constant flow of information on the internet encourages us to be spontaneous and may trigger us to take a photograph of someone and upload it, when in hindsight in might have been a bad idea if the photo came out bad and people will instantly view it differently and make assumptions of the reason behind this shared photo. The last dimension is called act, Hobbs (2011) draws on theories from Paulo Freire and John Dewey, stating that in the classroom students develop needed skills for engaging in genuine democratic citizenship. In other words, share knowledge, collaborating to solve problems, such as meanings in a text.

Finally, one key aspect to consider when using popular culture texts in an educational context is to be aware of different popular culture texts and their qualities of potential inclusion and exclusion of students according to Duff (2002). It seems that a common thread throughout this synthesis’ findings is to get students involved in the education by working with text that students are likely to identify themselves with. Through her observations of a year 10 class in a Canadian upper secondary school, Duff (2002) found that the practices of using popular culture excluded “ESL students from the local English speaking discourse community and positioned them as outsiders or
outcasts” (p. 484). Further, Duff (2002) means that without cultural reference points, students with different ethnic background might fail to find certain connections in texts that facilitate their comprehension of texts bound to a certain (western) culture. In conclusion, there is no security that popular culture texts will not alienate students in a similar way traditional texts might. When applying these texts, one must be aware of students’ backgrounds to able to tend to their needs, much like the success story of the Thai student discussed earlier (Li, 2012). Implications connected to this issue will be discussed further in the concluding section of this research synthesis.
6. Discussion & Conclusion

The research summarized and contrasted in this research synthesis have presented that the use of popular culture and other forms of mediation have affected language teaching and learning in a number of ways. Firstly, the vast and never ending supply of texts in popular culture and digital media has given students opportunities to showcase literacies that before have been either hidden or ignored. However, the use of popular culture has also prompted a fundamental need to teach students a new form of literacy, namely critical media literacy. Critical media literacy refers to the ability to reflect on the pleasures derived from popular culture in its different forms, in other words, the analysis of visual and audio texts, both printed and non-printed (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000).

Research has found that the transition to school has been smooth in most cases due to the prior and extensive relationship with popular culture that many children today have before they start school (Fast, 2007). There are report of many children being able to read before they have even started school (Liberg, 2010).

There has been a change in how students and teachers today approach education. Students’ out-of-school literacies are taken advantage of and no longer ignored. The multiliteracies that students have and acquire through digital popular culture help them to fortify their identities (Hughes & Robertson, 2010) and teachers feel that there is a closer relationship between them and the students when working with popular culture (Millard, 2003.)

How has the use of popular culture and other forms of mediation affected language learning? In their research, Hobbs and Frost (2003) found that the engagement with popular culture and teaching of critical literacy, not only developed comprehension and critical thinking, but also other English art skills such as writing and reading. These results are shared by Hughes and Robertson (2010) who also stated that multiliteracies helped weaker students to perform better and gradually improve other literacies within the domain of the English language.
Further, Hughes and Robertson (2010) mention that the search for identity is a common theme among adolescents today, which makes it extremely important to teach them critical literacy. Especially in these times of political change and reports of war across the world. Students not only need, but deserves to be educated so that they can opinionate themselves fairly based on what they have learnt, and not just because of what is being said in the media or on social network sites.

Speaking about identities, it leads us in to the next part about what aspects to consider when using popular culture and media in an educational text. Where many classrooms in Sweden today are considered to mirror the emerging multicultural society, one must as a teacher consider that different students deriving from separate cultures might affect the outcomes of class room activities using popular culture and modern forms of mediation. One must appreciate that students will view and read texts differently as a result of this and also that some students may struggle to comprehend messages conveyed in a text due to the cultural discrepancies, just as Li (2012) and Duff (2002) showcased through their examples. Thus, one implication for teachers, seems to be to make sure that every student is given opportunities to create meaning and intertextuality between themselves and other texts, either by letting students bring their own popular texts that they can relate to into class or by creating heterogeneous groups in class when working with these texts so that students can analyze texts together in pursuit of meaning and English learning.

Even though this research synthesis have presented research results that identifies acquisition and development of English language skills through the use of popular culture and modern forms of mediation to some extent in a number of cases, it comes short of unveiling any major measurable effects that these texts have had on English teaching and learning. However, the majority of the studies included in this synthesis agree on the effects it has had on the format of English education, changing how teachers in union with students approach texts. In order to fully answer how popular culture and new forms of mediation have affected teaching and learning of English, more research where acquisition of English art skills are measured would be needed to be considered. These kind of studies have been found hard to come by using the different databases. Albeit true that most of the studies incorporated in this research synthesis show results of deeper understanding of texts and English literacy acquisition in many cases, a limitation of this research synthesis that must be considered is that, without sufficient studies where effects have been measured, cannot fully answer the
research question without offering directions towards future research on the matter which focus on acquisition of English skills other the critical literacy.

The overarching issue of locating the above discussed studies goes hand in hand with a surprising finding in this research synthesis not anticipated. Considering the publication dates of the different research studies, there has been a decrease in speaking about popular culture in relation to English teaching and learning along time, instead the term seems to have been deconstructed and terms used more frequently are digital media, social (also digital) networks, digital culture and youth culture.

I propose that more research in form of action research is carried out in efforts to further understand the effects of these types of texts have on English learning and the learning of 21st century literacy skills. The final words of this research synthesis are based on the findings presented in the results and my own reflection of them: Popular culture and new forms of mediation have both simplified and made English education more complex. Simplified in the sense of how easily and fast texts can be accessed, and more complex in the sense that texts have the possibilities of being read in multiple ways enabling the texts and learning more multi layered.
References


