Examensarbete
15 högskolepoäng

Approaching authentic texts in the second language classroom

– Some factors to consider

Autentiska texter i språkundervisningen – Några viktiga faktorer

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Lärarexamen 270 hp poäng
Moderna språk engelska
Final seminar 2009-01-15

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the underlying factors involved in introducing authentic literature to the EFL classroom. The purpose has been to establish which factors should be considered in order to facilitate both the discrepancies between more literate pupils and less literate pupils, and the differing experiences and backgrounds of the class as a whole. The research focuses on the introduction of literature within whole group reading sessions, and considers factors such as equal reading levels versus below reading levels, protagonist gender, book titles and the amount of English read outside of the classroom.

The dissertation discusses the reliability of readability programs, vocabulary required in order to comprehend second language literature, pupils’ ever increasing contact with English outside of school and pupils’ reactions to texts deemed either equal or below their own literacy level. In a classroom investigation, pupils were presented with texts taken from books judged to be either equal to or below their suggested age group, and asked to comment on their reading experiences. Results showed that texts from both sectors were received favourably, and that factors such as genre, protagonist gender and the book’s title were more decisive factors to a book’s popularity. Indeed, pupils noticed little or no difference in books written for a younger audience. Furthermore, an interview with an English teacher at a compulsory school confirmed that a book’s suggested age range had little or no importance when choosing texts for the classroom, and suggests that vocabulary focus in class can combat any discrepancy in pupil literacy levels.

**Keywords and concepts:** Authentic texts, readability, levelling, English fiction, exterior factors to language acquisition.
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Being a parent of two bilingual children (Swedish/English) has made me very aware of my own education, and how it acts as a theoretical backup in the linguistic choices I have introduced for them. One such linguistic development was realized through reading stories with my children. As my eldest daughter grew older, I found that the vocabulary in stories we were reading slowly began to surpass her own competence in English, and I found myself reverting back to stories aimed at maybe three to four-year-old native speakers. This resulted in complete understanding of the text on my daughter’s behalf, but at the cost of a more developed narrative that a story aimed at six-year-olds demands. The plots of these texts were simple, to say the least, the text larger, and the use of illustrations dominated. I was left with a dilemma – to soldier on with these simpler texts, risking lacklustre interest from my daughter, or to tackle the stories aimed at six-year-old native speakers, which demanded the explanation of harder words, and for that matter the break up of a large share of suspense. On a professional level this experience has encouraged my interest in second language development in the classroom. Does a book originally aimed at nine to twelve-year-old readers restrict its use for older second language learners, or can a ninth grade class benefit from reading literature aimed at younger readers, in order to establish full understanding of context? Indeed, is it likely that pupils notice any difference at all while reading such texts?

Furthermore, EFL classrooms include pupils with mixed abilities. Pupils with different cultural backgrounds, reading abilities, motivational levels and leisure activities combine to form a disparate but unified group - the goal being the learning of English. While introducing literature the EFL teacher should then seek to encompass these disparities, but then other factors such as genre, book titles, and the protagonist’s gender come into play. If we add to these factors the pupils’ contact with the target language outside of the classroom, how best does the teacher take these different factors into account when introducing texts?
1.2 Purpose

It is questionable whether all fifteen-year-old pupils would feel comfortable tackling a novel written for similar aged first language speakers, so I am interested in seeing if texts aimed at younger age groups (12-13-years-old) would be more suitable, or whether the ‘simpler’ content matter within these texts would lead to a lack of interest from the pupils’ side. Furthermore, due to the disparate nature of any class, I would like to establish which factors the language teacher should consider before and after the introduction of reading projects. Being aware of the great linguistic discrepancy between any number of pupils in a class, my focus has remained upon group reading sessions, while at the same time trying to establish how literature can favour the needs of the individual.

1.3 Questions

During my research for this dissertation, and due to the age/content dilemma facing the teacher presenting English literature in the classroom, I chose to focus on two key research questions:

- What reaction do ninth grade pupils give after reading both ‘equal level’ and ‘below level’ texts?
- Which factors should the teacher consider when selecting texts for the EFL classroom?
2 Theory

2.1 Adapted or authentic texts?

When choosing literature for the EFL classroom, a teacher is inevitably faced with a choice between the often simplified texts provided in a textbook, or texts of a more ‘genuine’ nature written primarily for purposes outside of the classroom. In their dissertation from 2005, Daskalos and Ling investigated pupils’ and teachers’ relationships to ‘authentic’ and ‘adapted’ texts in order to assess which would be the most beneficial to use in the classroom. In an interview with a teacher at a compulsory school in Sweden, it was suggested that students preferred authentic material over the texts provided in the textbook because they were considered to be “the real thing”. The teacher in question used the textbook “rarely”, due to the fact that “the texts seemed fixed to him” (2005, p29). Textbooks are without doubt an aid to both the language teacher and the language learner, and it was suggested that textbooks were most beneficial in combination with other authentic material (2005, p35).

There are as many proponents of simplified texts, or so called ‘adapted’ texts as there are of authentic ones. Many proponents suggest that simplified texts limit the flow of new input, giving the learner more chance to focus on a particular linguistic feature. Davies and Widdowson add that simplified texts are often seen as valuable aids to learning because they accurately reflect what the reader already knows about language and have the capacity to extend this knowledge (in Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy and McNamara 2007, p16). This reflects Krashen’s Input theory, otherwise known as the ‘i +1’ theory of comprehensible input. This theory suggests that the learner should meet input that is slightly beyond their current language ability. Should they be exposed to enough input of this nature, the learner would then encounter all the sufficient linguistic requirements to develop a competent language – grammar, morphology and semantics together. This theory, according to Crossley et al. could in effect support self acquisition, bypassing the need for formal education, but they suggest that it is not sufficient by itself because learners also need to be motivated effectively to comprehend the input they receive (2007, p16). Krashen’s theory is not without its opponents however, among them Richard Allwright and Michael Long, whose separate work on an interaction hypothesis suggests that it is not merely enough to read in order to comprehend. Both Allwright and Long claim that it is through interaction that
acquisition occurs (in Johnson, 2001, p95), which both dispels Kraschen’s theory and has implications for EFL teachers, regardless of whether texts are adapted or authentic.

Detractors of simplified texts argue that over-simplification of authentic texts leads to a misleading idea of how a language is built up. Long and Ross suggest that “the removal of complex linguistic forms in favour of more simplified and frequent forms must inevitably deny learners the opportunity to learn the natural forms of language” (in Crossley et al. 2007, p16). Lundahl points out that adapted texts “lack descriptions, avoid imagery and explain everything in an exaggerated manner so that they become uninteresting to read” (1998, p61; my translation). Lundahl goes on to suggest that adapted texts even “scale down cultural dimensions” with regard to “everyday expressions or descriptions of children’s daily life” (1998 p62). Furthermore, Crossley et al. suggest that adapted texts create more problems than they solve:

Some critics have hypothesized that the use of simplified texts to assist L2 learners may actually be counterproductive because these texts may not allow the learners to graduate to more advanced texts that have sentences of natural length, more complex structural patterns, and more deeply embedded linguistic cues different from those of simplified texts. (2007 p17)

2.2 Benefits of authentic texts

“Of undisputed origin, genuine” – so states the The New Oxford Dictionary of English (Pearsall 1998, p113), in its clarification of the word ‘authentic’. Taken within its pedagogical sphere, an authentic text can be seen as a text written solely for the use of target language speakers, for pleasure or information, and is of such nature that it reflects the target speaker’s language and cultural experience within his or her geographical and linguistic boundaries. Authentic texts are therefore unabridged examples of the target language, and for the purposes of this dissertation the target language referred to is English. These texts are provided as seen, and are likely to include genuine examples of slang and other cultural references. For the second language teacher fictional literature is perhaps the most obvious entry point when introducing authentic texts into the classroom, but it goes without saying that all authentic material can be seen as a tool when introducing authentic texts into the classroom. To clarify, authentic texts fill essentially the following criteria:
- They are originally created to fulfil a social purpose in the language community for which it was intended.
- They encompass all text-based articles in the target language for the genre-intended target audience [and] can all be considered authentic texts. (Crossley et al. 2007)

This then could be anything from a tourist brochure, a national newspaper, a novel, a recipe, an advertisement, a handbook or even a telephone directory. Most focus within teacher training regarding the use of authentic material is laid upon works of fiction, primarily novels written for children aged between nine and fifteen years of age. The language contained within them has been written by authors skilled in capturing the imagination of younger readers, with the focus placed on colourful narrative and character development rather than constructing narratives which conform to a specific linguistic formula promoted by publishers of second language material.

The language provided in textbooks and on textbook related CD’s does not always live up to the realistic situations the pupil will encounter whilst spending time in an English speaking country. Therefore it is highly beneficial for the pupil to be exposed to more ‘genuine’ native-like discourse, to attain what the course plan for English grade nine states as the “understanding of other cultures and intercultural competence” (Skolverket 2000; my translation). Henry Sweet, seen as one of the first linguists thanks to his work during the late 1900’s stated that:

The great advantage of natural, idiomatic texts over artificial ‘methods’ or ‘series’ is that they do justice to every feature of the language. The artificial systems, on the other hand, tend to cause incessant repetition of certain grammatical constructions, certain elements of the vocabulary, certain combination of words to the almost total exclusion of other which are equally, or perhaps even more, essential. (in Gilmore 2007, p97)

It is debatable whether using adapted texts is any less pedagogical than using authentic texts, and certainly within the lower grades there are advantages to using ‘levelled readers’ for beginners or intermediate learners. The use of the textbook is almost inevitable within second language learning, and here the author’s adaptation of texts to coincide with highlighted grammatical features is both an aid to teacher and pupil alike. It is questionable however that continual textbook based learning or prolonged exposure to levelled readers is entirely
beneficial to second language learners, and that it in some way deprives the learner of the more genuine elements of language used in authentic texts. For my research I have concluded that an investigation using only authentic material would be of the greatest benefit to both my results and my long term pedagogical strategies. It is however important to establish how both adapted and authentic texts can be graded in order to establish a correct match with a reader’s literacy level, and a description of these procedures follows in the next chapter.

2.3 Levelled readers and ‘readability’

One of the tools available to the teacher in introducing texts into the classroom is to utilise readability formulae and so called ‘levelled readers’. Readability tests are numerous in quantity, so many as two hundred are in use, but the best established and reliable are the Fry Readability Graph and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. These tests enable the teacher to establish a suitable grade level according to the complexity of the text. The Flesch-Kincaid grade level for example calculates readability based on the average sentence length and average number of syllables per word. Grade level is reached by the following formula:

\[ 0.39 \times \frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} + 11.8 \times \frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} - 15.59 \]

The result of this formula provides a number that corresponds to a grade level. For example, a score of 8.5 suggests a text compatible with an eighth grade US student (13-14 years-old). Furthermore, the Flesch-Kincaid formula also calculates a ‘readability’ level, based on figures from 0-100. Here the lower the figure the more difficult the text is to read, and suggests that a text gaining a level of around 60 points would be at the level of a US eighth grade student – i.e. between 13-14-years-old.

\[ 206.835 - 1.015 \left( \frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) - 84.6 \left( \frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right) \]

Figure 1: The Flesch-Kincaid reading ease formula

\[ ^1 \text{A Swedish equivalent to the American based readability programmes would be LIX – läsbarhetsindex.} \]
Similarly, the Fry readability graph calculates a score based on the amount of sentences and syllables, and requires at least three 100 word texts to be sampled – the results of which can be read off on the graph resulting in an appropriate grade level for the diagnosed text.

![Figure 2: Fry’s readability graph](image)

However statistically accurate readability formulae may be, they can only be seen as extremely objective, and even Fry suggests that “readability formulas do not take into account factors inside the reader’s head and tend to be ‘bottom up’ or text based in theoretical terms.” (2002, p289) In fact most readability tests are so objective that often the researcher merely requires to enter the text’s numerical information into a software based readability programme to establish the corresponding grade.

An alternative to formulaic based readability programmes is the use of so called ‘levelling’, which takes into account factors outside of the range of readability formulae. Areas such as text content, illustrations, text length and conformance to a curriculum and language structure are considered. There is of course an abundance of different levelling theories available to the teacher or language researcher. However, for the purposes of my research such levelling methods proved difficult to diagnose. Accordingly, Fry goes on to state that “levelling tends to grade books between kindergarten and grade 6 with some going only to third or fourth grades” and adds that “levelling is not used outside of the elementary classroom”, and that
“levelling is used most extensively at the primary levels in conjunction with teaching reading.” (2002, p289)

2.4 ‘Top down’ and ‘Bottom up’

The way in which we read texts is not uniform, and much depends upon our prior knowledge of a text’s content and our ability to ‘decode’ the language within. In the case of a second language learner these two matters become even more decisive. It is in the nature of a second language learner to feel the need to understand every element of a provided text, and this entails the encryption of the text at a very close level, from phonemic construction to sentence comprehension, sentence linking strategies through to the comprehension of paragraphs and finally an understanding of the text as a whole. This method is referred to as ‘bottom up’, and suggests a slower, more concentrated reading style reflecting that of the second language learner in her meeting with a new text. The degree to which the second language learner is required to study at a ‘bottom up’ level is dependent upon their level of language comprehension.

The L2 reader confronted with a text that is considered below their level of comprehension would find the ‘bottom up’ scenario as somewhat unnecessary and time consuming. Coady suggests that “beginning readers focus on process strategies (e.g., word identification), whereas more proficient readers shift attention to more abstract conceptual abilities and make better use of background knowledge, using only as much textual information as needed for confirming and predicting the information in the text” (in Mackay, Barkman and Jordan 1979, pp5-12). Gabe summarises Goodman’s research into top down methodology by concluding that:

Since it did not seem likely that fluent readers had the time to look at all the words on a page and still read at a rapid rate, it made sense that good readers used knowledge they brought to the reading and then read by predicting information, sampling the text, and confirming the prediction. (1991, p375)

The proficient reader has therefore more success while attaining a so called ‘top down’ reading style, whereby their prior knowledge of a language helps in predicting language patterns which in turn aids meaning. However, in order to be able to decode the information
provided in a text, it is necessary for the level of comprehension to be high enough for any meaning to take place. Therefore it can be a hinder to provide even a competent second language learner with a text containing vocabulary too far above the pupil’s level of comprehension. Here again the second language teacher finds themselves with a predicament – aim too low and a section of the class may be frustrated by the content of the text; aim too high and a section of the class will be frustrated by the vocabulary in the text.

It could also be said that the familiarity of a specific genre could benefit the reader, where pre-conceived ideas of how genres are presented provide the reader with enough clues about the formation of certain texts; Once upon a time…would suggest a classic saga with undoubtedly a happy ending, good would fight against evil, etc. Top down methodology entails the need for some amount of guessing on the reader’s behalf, but the guessing required in order to establish meaning requires in turn an established vocabulary to build upon. Lundahl suggests that “one requires reasonably good language ability to be able to read a text in a foreign language. Guessing has to have something to base itself on.” (1998, p18 my translation) The amount of vocabulary required to understand an English novel therefore becomes an important aspect in a reader’s ability to comfortably use a top down reading strategy.

The ideas behind bottom up and top down reading strategies go a long way to summarise the processes involved in all reading, but this is perhaps only a very restrictive view of reading strategies. What is more likely is that reading involves a combination of the two methods. In his summary of current reading theory, Grabe infers that reading is a more of an interactive process, combining strategies from both bottom up and top down; “Reading is interactive; the reader makes use of information from his/her background knowledge as well as information from the printed page. Reading is also interactive in the sense that many skills work together simultaneously in the process” (1991, p378). Lundahl suggests that all readers regularly change strategies, depending on both our reasons for reading and our familiarity with the text:

Depending on whether the content is familiar to us and the amount of hard words is restrictive, we are able to understand the entirety of the text. However, now and then we need to stop and go back to review singularities or to check something. A harder text on a subject unfamiliar to us forces us to use a bottom up reading style. Reading is also influenced by the tasks following it. The teacher can steer the pupils towards either detail or the text in its entirety. (1993, p20 my translation)
2.5 Vocabulary required

In his 2006 study ‘How Large a Vocabulary is Needed For Reading and Listening?’, Paul Nation considered the amount of vocabulary a native speaker of English would need to read and comprehend in order to understand different texts, including novels, newspapers and graded readers. In other words “how much unknown vocabulary can be tolerated in a text before it interferes with comprehension?” (2006, p61) In an earlier study by Hu and Nation (2000) it had been found that ‘text coverage’, that is to say “the percentage of running words in the text known by the readers required to gain adequate comprehension” was 98%, which equalled 1 unknown word in 50 (2006, p61). With these figures as a guide, Nation fed the vocabulary of five English novels into the British National Corpus, in order to establish how many word families the reader would have to be familiar with in order to gain comprehension, or 98% text coverage. The results showed that a vocabulary between 8000 to 9000 words was required. To read a newspaper was calculated to require a vocabulary of 8000 words, and to comprehend a graded text required a vocabulary of some 3000 words. This is interesting from a teacher’s point of view as it shows that whilst a vocabulary of 3000 words enables understanding of a graded reader, such a relatively limited vocabulary would only gain between 87-94% of comprehension required to read a fully fledged English novel. This discrepancy is a factor to consider when introducing texts to the classroom, and can affect the teacher’s strategies in involving word lists or scaffolding exercises.

2.6 Skolverket’s Nu-03 report

A report published in 2005 focused on ninth grade pupils’ relationship to English as a school subject. This report is a follow up from a similar study, 1992’s Nu-92 where some 10 000 ninth grade pupils were asked about their attitude to English both as a school subject and as a world language. In Nu-03 some 7000 pupils took part in a wide ranging questionnaire as well as reading and listening tests. The results present a very precise picture of the pupils’ relationship to English as a school subject and how English is taught in the ninth grade. Attitudes towards English, both as a school subject and a world language were evaluated, as well as pupils’ awareness of the syllabus for English and their ability to influence its content. One of the findings of the report was the influence of English as a language outside of the
school. It showed that both the amount of English that pupils come into contact with, and the methods through which they do so had increased dramatically since the *Nu-92* report. Accordingly, pupils had developed greater confidence in using English outside of the classroom, whether it be through international contacts, or simply the ability to direct a tourist to the nearest place of interest. The further details of these results will be discussed further on in this paper, but it is without doubt a report that has implications for both teacher and pupil alike. Due to the influence of Internet, computer games and the ever increasing exposure to English through television, pupils are coming to the classroom with a greater background knowledge of the target language. This in turn can only be seen as beneficial, increasing the chances of vocabulary acquisition, while encouraging the teacher to encompass new technology to teach English.

### 2.7 Theory summary

The results of readability programs aid the teacher in establishing the level of vocabulary focus required either before, during or after reading sessions. Therefore, they can primarily be seen as a method that initially focuses on bottom up reading styles. It has been established however that readers fluctuate between bottom up and top down methods depending on a number of aspects. Firstly, reading methods are affected by the tasks teachers create, which can either focus on content or specific aspects of a text. Secondly, reading methods are reliant on our initial impressions of a text and our familiarity with its content or genre. It is therefore not at all unusual for a competent reader to revert to a bottom up style of reading when faced with a difficult text or a genre which introduces seemingly unfamiliar vocabulary.

In the light of the *Nu-03* report, it was made clear that today’s learners of English encounter the language outside of school to a much larger degree than ever before. This can only have a positive influence on language acquisition, and certainly increases the chances of pupils recognising a larger amount of vocabulary on their first encounters with a new text. This aspect can only benefit the EFL learner, and gives the learner a stronger chance of being able to comfortably fluctuate between the two reading styles. An increased vocabulary, due in turn to this exterior input can therefore increase the chances of gaining better comprehension of a text, an aspect taken up in Nation’s report. Here it was established that the text coverage required to gain a general comprehension of an English novel was 98%, or 1 unknown word.
in every 50 (2006, p61). Accordingly, a pupil who brings to the classroom a knowledge of the target language that has been aided by exterior input has a greater chance of improving his or her vocabulary, thus gaining both greater comprehension of a text, and the ability to adapt reading methods to the task at hand.

In the following diagram, we see how these theories can merge to form a ‘middle ground’ of reading comprehension. This middle ground is established when the pupil can successfully fluctuate between a bottom up and a top down reading perspective, but it also incorporates exterior factors such as acquired language outside of the classroom, and the level of vocabulary required to gain comprehension, either with the help of the readability programs’ bottom up focus or a top down ‘entirety’ vocabulary focus.
3 Method

3.1 ‘Grading’ the text

It was my intention to test pupil reaction after two ninth grade classes read short extracts from English novels. The first group of texts were aimed at sixth grade pupils and below, the second set was aimed at ninth grade pupils and above. Despite the fact that several of the texts I reviewed came with a suggested reading age, (suggested reading within Bo Lundahl’s Läsa på främmande språk came divided into suitable ages) I was keen to establish empirical ‘proof’ of the suggested reading age of the texts. In order to do this I entrusted two readability programs, namely the aforementioned Fry’s Readability Graph, and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade level. This was in order to establish a suggested reading age for the chosen texts, bearing in mind that the reading age is aimed at L1 readers.

I was soon presented with a problem; this being that for all the empirical calculations that were required to establish the reading level of a book, none of this information takes into account the author’s style, set expressions, slang and other cultural markers that provide the EFL reader with any number of hinders. Take the following text taken from the novel I am David by Anne Holm for example:

In his mind's eye David saw once again the grey bare room he knew so well. he saw the man and was conscious, somewhere in the pit of his stomach, of the hard knot of hate he felt whenever he saw him. (1963, p1)

Although the main character of the above text is a twelve-year-old boy, the results using the Flesch-Kincaid program suggested the book to be suitable for US eighth grade, or 13-14 year-old-pupils. Furthermore, this short extract from the text contains a number of expressions that would possibly be unfamiliar to the 13-14-year-old EFL reader, and certainly a twelve-year-old would soon run into difficulty. How does one understand the expressions “in his mind’s eye”, or “in the pit of his stomach” or even “the hard knot of hate”? The story line of I am David is however a universal one, where a young boy escapes from a concentration camp and

2 All tests based on measuring a 500 word sample of text. Grade levels according to the US grade system.
learns to survive on his own initiative and wits. Such stories are considered to have no age boundary, and the author has written a complex text which therefore gave a high result on the Fleisch-Kincaid index. I would therefore consider it suitable for fifteen-year-old pupils, but whether such texts are appropriate for younger age groups is debatable – much depends on a teacher’s pre- and post reading activities, an area I will discuss further on in this dissertation.

One’s first intuition is to judge the level of the book by the age of the lead character. This seems especially suitable with books aged at a younger audience, where the lead character reflects the feelings and experiences of his or her audience. I was therefore surprised when the readability index based on the Fleish-Kinkaid readability program showed that an extract from Nick Hornby’s *Slam* placed the text at the level of American grade six, i.e. 11-12 year-olds. Measured according to Fry’s readability programme it gains a level equal to the capabilities of a ten-year-old. Here we have a text featuring the thoughts of one very clear-headed fifteen-year-old male, with a subject matter that focuses predominantly on his attitude towards hearing of his girlfriend’s pregnancy. Such subject matter could be considered unsuitable for a twelve-year-old reader, and here I found myself with the dilemma of not age versus content matter but content matter versus age. As reflected in the readability results for *I am David*, the readability charts could not accurately solve the age versus content dilemma.
What is alarming then is that while such readability programmes can give an accurate guide to the vocabulary level used within a piece of literature, they cannot give a clear indication of content – this is purely a matter for the teacher to take into his or her hands. As in the case of Nick Hornby’s *Slam*, a teacher using (and trusting in) readability programmes could easily introduce the book to sixth grade pupils, but risks the chance of alienating pupils due to the misguided content. Pitcher and Fang suggest that “close attention to text levels could be detrimental in the reader–text matching process” (2007 p43). Therefore readability programs can only provide a guide for the teacher, and can assist in assessing the need for separate word lists or extra scaffolding before and after reading. I remain however convinced that such programs are a relatively accurate indication of vocabulary levels, and while I remain surprised at the seemingly low levels recorded by books such as *Daniel Half Human*, a book originally written for adults, I consider it worthwhile to present these results. These go to show that the complexity or simplicity of a vocabulary does not always reflect the author or publishing houses’ intentions with a book, and a what at first sight relatively simple

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title/Author</th>
<th>Age lead character</th>
<th>Results Fry (average no. sentences per 100 words + average no. of syllables per 100 words)</th>
<th>Appropriate Fry grade Level</th>
<th>Results Flesch-Kincaid/readability</th>
<th>Appropriate Flesch-Kincaid grade level</th>
<th>Appropriate age level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slam Nick Hornby</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.6/128.6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am David Ann Holm</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.2/126.6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Giver Lois Lowry</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.3/148.2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep Water Ann Turnbull</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13.6/123.8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two weeks with the Queen David Glietzman</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9/130.1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Warehouse Keith Gray</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.8/126.1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Half Human David Chotjewitz</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.7/142.4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10-11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Grade/age levels according to Fry’s Readability Graph and the Flesch-Kincaid readability program.
vocabulary can hide a complex and typically age related topic. Readability programs can however give some indication as to the difficulties to be expected within a text, if taken on a purely linguistic level. What is more likely is that a teacher is recommended literature from educational supplements, publishing houses or school libraries where books have already been allotted an age group, often 9 to 12 years or ‘Young adult fiction’. Here, other factors outside of vocabulary levels come into play, be it cultural relevance, age/topic concordance or in the case of school libraries, books which have worked well will previous teachers or classes.

I became more convinced that subject matter and the age of the main character was a more successful guide in separating the two levels of texts for the ninth grade pupils. Exceptions abounded, as was the case with *I am David* (which I subsequently refrained from using in my research), but my focus lay in using texts which very clearly contained content aimed at both 15 and 12-year-old pupils, in order to gain a noteworthy reaction from the pupils. I decided that the chosen texts, six in total, three to each age group (grades six and nine) should feature the following attributes:

1. In the case of the ninth grade text, a main character of at least 14-years of age.
2. In the case of the sixth grade text, a main character of at least 11 years of age.

Two texts however, *Deep Water* by Ann Turnbull and *Daniel Half Human* by David Chotjewitz were included for completely different reasons. Firstly, despite the age of the lead character in *Deep Water* remaining undisclosed, I would suggest an age of 12. What is more interesting for the purpose of my study is that this text only gave a very low grade on both the Fry readability graph and the Flesch-Kincaid index. It would be therefore very interesting to see if the pupils reacted either positively or negatively after reading this text, or if they noticed any difference whatsoever. Secondly, *David Half Human* is considered to be a work of fiction for adults, but interestingly features a thirteen year old boy in the run up to the Second World War. Once again I was surprised by the results the readability test provided. Both reading programs resulted in a grade level equivalent to grade six. Considering that this is a book aimed at adults, it was a very low result indeed. However, like *I am David*, the text sample used included vocabulary in combination with a more advanced sentence construction, which I believed would trouble many pupils.
3.2 Procedure - Two levels, one class

In order to implement my investigation I required two ninth grade classes to read two extracts from a total of six English novels. For convenience I chose classes from my current work placement school, a compulsory school in the south west of Skåne. This was mainly due to my already established relationship with both pupils and staff. I considered it beneficial to survey pupils who were already familiar with my teaching methods, as I have known these pupils since they were in the sixth grade. The school lies in the countryside, and attracts pupils from many neighbouring communities. Parents are considered to have mixed educational backgrounds, and the school’s average merit rating from 2008 is rated at 208 points, in line with the national average of 209 points for the same year. The merit system comprises points correlating to grades, where a pass equals 10 points, a pass with distinction equals 15 points, and a pass with special distinction equals 20 points. The total merit rating is composed of sixteen of the pupil’s best grades to form their final grade.

Over the course of four separate lessons, two for each ninth grade class, I introduced six text extracts of 500 words taken from six English novels. On the first day, during two separate lessons I introduced three texts that I considered suitable for ninth grade readers. On the second day, I introduced three further texts, these I considered best suitable for sixth grade pupils. The pupils were informed that they were to choose one text, read through it at their own pace, and then answer questions from a questionnaire (see appendix). I only produced the questionnaire to each individual pupil after they had read their chosen text. This was due to a belief that pupils could first be distracted by the questionnaire if placed side by side with the text, and secondly that prior knowledge of the questions to be asked would affect the way in which the pupils read the text. I was keen for pupils to adapt a ‘top down’ approach to their reading, but was aware that this was an area that I could not steer myself. However, the pupils only had the time given within the lesson (50 minutes) to complete the task, which in real terms decreased to around 30 minutes after I had first explained my intentions for the lesson. This matter in itself might have detracted from a ‘bottom down’ reading style. On the second day, the need for explanation was reduced, which gave pupils a longer period to complete the task.
My reason for providing three texts in each session was to enable the pupils to exercise some form of control over the texts they were to read. I also felt that this would result in more active reading if the pupils had had some influence over the exercise, which in turn would result in a more engaged response to my questionnaire. Furthermore, I feel it helped create interest in the texts that could have been lost due to the minimal scaffolding provided. This entailed using only a brief summary of the stories the excerpts were taken from, for example a read through of the books’ back cover ‘blurb’ – often a very direct and concise résumé. To further aid a ‘top down’ form of reading, I provided no word lists or dictionaries. Additionally, I found it important to remove all traces of age indication that may steer the pupils’ reactions. I did this by copying the texts into a uniform standard, namely Times New Roman font size 12. This removed such age appropriate reading aids such as larger texts and introductory chapter pictures for younger readers (as featured in *Deep Water*).

### 3.3 Texts to be evaluated

The following section includes summaries I used in my introduction of each text. Hereafter the pupil then chose which text they were to read. These summaries have been divided into two categories, namely ‘9th grade texts’ and ‘6th grade texts’.

#### 9th grade texts

*The Warehouse* by Keith Gray

“The warehouse is: "the somewhere else you can go when there’s nowhere else left.” Located in the dockland of a small northern town, the warehouse is a refuge for young people who have slipped through society’s safety net. A cast of memorable characters – Robbie, Amy, Kinard, Lem and Canner – have, for various reasons found themselves there. They face a struggle for survival, but for dignity too.”

*Slam* by Nick Hornby

“You know that bit in a film when they show couples laughing and holding hands and kissing in lots of different places while a song plays? Alicia and I were like that, except we didn’t go to lots of different places. We went to about three, including Alicia’s bedroom. Anyway. It
took years for everything to come together like that, and it took two seconds to screw it all up.
One mistake and my life would never be the same.”

_Daniel Half Human_ by David Chotjewitz

“Germany, 1933. Daniel Hraushaar is living comfortably in Hamburg with his family –
enjoying school, playing soccer and hanging out with his best friend, Armin. There’s a rising
tide of anti-Semitism in the country and Daniel and Armin get caught up in it – applying to
join the Hitler Youth and painting swastikas on walls – even enjoying getting thrown into jail
for this, where they swear everlasting brotherhood to one another. Then a bombshell: Daniel
discovers his mother is Jewish, making him half-Jewish and, in Aryan eyes, and his own, half
human.”

6th grade texts

_Two Weeks with the Queen_ by David Gleitzman

“Colin Mudford is on a quest. His brother Luke has cancer and the doctors in Australia don’t
seem able to cure him. Sent to London to stay with his Aunty Iris, Colin reckons it’s up to
him to find the best doctor in the world. And how better to do this than by asking the Queen to
help…”

_The Giver_ by Lois Lowry

“It is the future. There is no war, no hunger, no pain. No one in the Community wants for
anything. Jonas’s life is simple, filled with routine and small pleasures. But everything
changes on the day of the Ceremony. From the moment Jonas is selected as the Receiver of
Memory for the Community, his life will never be the same.”

_Deep Water_ by Ann Turnbull

“When Jon agrees to skip school with Ryan, he never dreams their adventure will end in such
a terrifying way. Ryan is depending on him. But who is Jon more afraid of – his mother or the
police?”
3.4 Interview methodology and ethics

Once I established my initial results based on my classroom observation, I was interested in visiting a school where the use of authentic English fiction was widely encouraged, in order to discuss with an experienced teacher the methods used whilst working with English literature. I stressed that the interviewee’s identity would remain undisclosed for the reader, and that all recorded material would be destroyed once its use had been expired. This was consistent with the views presented by Johansson and Svedner in their discussion on ethical aspects within methodology: “The participants should also be sure that their anonymity is protected, in the final report, it should not be possible to identify school, teacher or pupil” (2004, p24). I chose to record our conversation, and asked permission for this from the interviewee prior to the interview taking place. The decision to record our conversation was mainly one of convenience – If I could refrain from taking notes during the interview I could concentrate more on the answers received, which led itself to a semi-structured interview in which I had the freedom of adding spontaneous questions if and when appropriate. It also gave me the opportunity of returning to the material when it came to transcription. The semi-structured nature of the interview also led to a more conversation like discussion, which I felt produced more genuine open-ended answers rather than an interviewee providing answers purely in response to given questions.
4 Results

4.1 Results of classroom investigation

Over a period of two consecutive days I collected data from two ninth grade English classes. On day one the two classes during two separate lessons read through one text of the three I had provided for that particular lesson. During the first lesson each class read texts that I have previously suggested being most suitable for a ninth grade class. On the second day the two classes read texts which I had deemed suitable for pupils in at least grade six. For the purpose of my results the two definitions ‘9th grade text’ and ‘6th grade text’ are used in all results.

This was then followed up by a questionnaire which was completed after reading each chosen text. On day one Class A totalled 15 pupils, and Class B totalled 16 pupils. In total there were 30 pupils involved in my investigation. On day two Class A totalled 14 pupils, due to one pupil being sick, and Class B totalled 14 pupils, due to one pupil being sick and another was absent due to other obligations. My results are based on the sum total of replies received, and henceforth a distinction between Class A and Class B is no longer required. All student comments received have been translated by myself from Swedish to English. The following results are divided up into a selection of key questions asked followed by a brief discussion of results and comments received. These questions have been translated by myself, and were originally written in Swedish.

Question one
Were there any words, sentences or expressions that were hard to understand?
(9th grade texts)

My initial interest in the pupils’ reaction to their chosen texts lay in their general understanding of the vocabulary. Two of the texts presented during the first lesson (*Slam, The Warehouse*) featured a main character of 15-years-old, and are presumed to be enjoyed most by readers of the same age, featuring a vocabulary that is considered equal to the linguistic capabilities of a 15-year-old native speaker. *Daniel Half Human* fell into another category, whereby the book is written for an adult audience, but features a 13-years-old main character. A total of 17 pupils had chosen to read *Slam*, 9 read *Daniel Half Human*, and 2 pupils chose *The Warehouse*. On answering the question “Were there any words, sentences or expressions
that you considered to be hard to understand”, I took any answer to suggest a positive answer as a ‘yes’. Several pupils pointed out how few words they had had trouble with – “bara några få”, “bara lite”, “ja, ett par stycken” but the very suggestion that they had encountered difficulties, however few, would have implications for both teaching strategies and a pupil’s long term understanding of the text. As only two pupils had chosen *The Warehouse*, the results can be somewhat misleading, giving a one hundred percent result. It is possible that a larger number of pupils would have also had difficulties with the text, but with such a low response it is difficult to ground any dependable theories upon. When tested with both the Fry Readability Graph and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade level, *Slam* attained a relatively low vocabulary count, suggesting the book to be suitable to grades as low as five and six, that is to say a reading age of 10 to 11-years-old. It is therefore interesting to note that the pupils who had no difficulty with the text exceeded those who experienced some difficulty with the vocabulary. This would suggest that the low grade count using both the Fry Readability Graph and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade level certainly has some relevance for the teacher when choosing texts. However, as mentioned earlier, the content of *Slam* might well be considered unsuitable for lower grades. Interestingly, *Daniel Half Human*, primarily written for an adult audience gave the pupils who chose this text the most trouble, with 7 out of 9 pupils suggesting they had difficulties with the vocabulary. Despite receiving a very low score on both the Fry Readability Graph and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (sixth grade equivalent), the text contains some complicated sentences; “They’d stood at the entrance and passed out cheap-looking leaflets with dastardly slurs against Hitler’s private army, the SA. Such provocation could not go unanswered.” The text in general feels ‘heavier’ than the others, and I could imagine ninth graders struggling to obtain a fluent reading style.

**Question two**

**Would you like to continue reading this book?**

(9th grade texts)

In correlation to the previous question, a connection can be made to a pupil’s experience with a text’s vocabulary and their willingness to continue with the text in its complete form. Where *Slam* readers experienced the least difficulty with the text, they went on to produce convincing results regarding their desire to continue reading the book – 12 out of 17 pupils suggested as such. *Daniel Half Human* received mixed results, with 5 out of 11 pupils not wishing to continue reading. It is possible that the slightly advanced vocabulary can be blamed, but in both cases other factors must be taken into account. It is also likely that the
limited texts gave an inkling of a plot line that the pupils found to be of interest, and would therefore be prepared to disregard their difficulties with an advanced vocabulary. This is certainly possible in the case of *Daniel Half Human*, where those who expressed a desire to continue reading commented that “it would be exciting to find out what happens”, “there was a lot of history in it” and that “it appears to be a good and exciting book.” Those who seemed to have had a harder time with the text added comments such as “I don’t understand anything”, “It wasn’t any good” to “I didn’t understand it and it was boring.” From the pupils’ comments it seemed very apparent that the plot line in *Slam* was a major reason in their desire to continue reading. Comments received included “It seemed interesting and is about the grown-up life that we ourselves are going to experience”, “I wanted to see if I was right about what I believed would happen” to “It seemed cute and cosy so why not!” Those who had a less positive experience with *Slam* added “It wasn’t exciting – I like more excitement in books” and that it was “depressing.”

**Question three**

**Were there any words, sentences or expressions that were hard to understand?**

*(6th grade texts)*

My primary interest with the sixth grade material was to discover whether the pupils became aware of a difference in both vocabulary and content. *Deep Water* proved to be a popular choice during this second lesson; the reasons for this I will take up in my final discussion. Sixteen pupils chose this text, with 10 out of 14 pupils suggesting that they had no trouble with the vocabulary whatsoever. This would coincide with the low grades given to the text after running the vocabulary through both the Fry Readability Graph and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade level reader, which resulted in the book being considered suitable for grades as low as two and three, that is to say 7 to 9-year-old pupils. Of the four pupils who did have difficulty with the text, only a small number of single words were pointed out as being difficult, namely ‘estate’, ‘sneaked’, ‘underpass’ and ‘kerb’. *The Giver* proved to be the second most popular choice, but resulted in a high percentage of pupils finding difficulty with the vocabulary. Words considered to be troublesome included ‘obediently’, ‘intrigued’, ‘churn’ and ‘reassuring’. The text provided was certainly less direct than *Deep Water*, and the text’s fantasy style plot line could have lead to less chance of deciphering the meaning of unknown words through context, a method which most pupils seemed to have established at this stage of their education. Not unlike *The Warehouse, Two Weeks with the Queen* gained little
attention from the pupils, with only three choosing to read the text. It is therefore difficult to establish any worthwhile discussion based on the results received.

**Question four**

Would you like to continue reading this book?

(6th grade texts)

The results in this section are not dissimilar to those of the ninth grade texts, where a text which resulted in little or no difficulty in comprehension went on to be one which the pupils would be happy to continue reading. Here 10 out of 16 pupils who chose *Deep Water* would be happy to continue with it, with comments ranging from “I want to find out what is going to happen”, “it was fun” to “I want to see what happens to the boys” and “it seemed exciting.” That the book is aimed at much younger pupils didn’t go entirely unnoticed however; “It seemed pointless in some way” suggested one pupil, “too childish” and “wimpish” commented another. *The Giver*, with its slightly surreal plot line resulted in a 50/50 result, and the obscurity of the text can lay partly to blame: “Hard work to read. Not my taste”, “Weird, you don’t really know what is happening” and “I soon got tired of the plot line” were some comments received. Of the three pupils that chose *Two Weeks with the Queen*, two pupils did not wish to continue reading further, stating that “I didn’t think it was interesting” and “it didn’t appear to be that fun, exactly.”

**Question five**

What age group did you think the book is aimed at?

(9th grade texts)

In the following section of my questionnaire, I considered the age range the pupils believed the texts to be written for. The suggested ages were 9 to 12-year olds, 13 to 14-year-olds, 15-16-year-olds and 16 years plus. The results seemed to concur with the authors’ and publishers’ intentions, and the books I deemed suitable for ninth grade reading fell within these age groups after pupil analysis. No pupils suggested that any of these books were written primarily for the age group 9 to 12-years-old. Although the age of the main character was not revealed in either the text summary presented to the pupils nor within two of the texts (*Slam* and *The Warehouse*), it is likely that the plot gave a hint of the predicted age of both the main character and the probable reader. The summary text to *Daniel Half Human* mentions a thirteen-year-old boy, possibly why two pupils suggested 13-14 year-olds as a predicted age range. It could be considered hierarchically sound to be seen to understand and enjoy a book.
which is aimed at one’s own age group, and this might be a factor to consider when introducing a book in the classroom. Although Deep Water produced the highest rating among books that pupils wanted to continue reading, the texts in this section produced on average a higher response with regard to the pupils’ wish to continue with a text, and the age group/content symmetry could here be of advantage to both pupil and teacher alike.

**Question six**

What age group did you think the book is aimed at?

*(6th grade texts)*

Interestingly, the results from the sixth grade texts showed a greater spread over the age groups, with one pupil even accurately suggesting a 9-12-year-old age range for Deep Water. However, the fact that as many as nine pupils considered this text to be aimed at 15-16-year-olds suggests that ninth grade pupils would be happy reading this book in its entirety. These results also coincide with the comments received from Maria, a teacher of English interviewed in the following chapter, who confirmed that pupils didn’t have any problems reading and accepting the content of Two Weeks with the Queen. The majority of pupils who read The Giver, that is to say 5 out of 8 pupils, placed it within the age range for 15 to 16-year-olds, which could coincide with the pupils’ mixed reaction to the text.

**4.1.1 Gender distribution (9th grade texts)**

I was interested to see if a pupil’s gender had any influence over the type of text chosen. Could it be that certain genres attracted one sex more than the other? The only clue to the content of the texts read was through my run through of the back page summary, or ‘blurb’. This gave a small indication of the story’s plot line, but this was the only form of scaffolding given. I find it interesting that a novel such as Slam received such interest from female pupils, with 12 out of 13 girls choosing to read this text. Could it be that they are more empathic, and are attracted to a plot line which featured a teenage relationship? In the case of Daniel Half Human, it is curious to note that only males had chosen to read this text. Is it that the title, featuring a boy’s name put off female pupils? Was the mention of the Second World War attractive to male pupils? Though the distribution weighed in favour of Daniel Half Human, with nine out of sixteen boys choosing to read this text, five boys chose Slam as their text of choice. The back page ‘blurb’ for Slam suggests (though not directly) a male protagonist, which may have attracted these pupils. However, only 2 of these 5 pupils had suggested
continuing with *Slam*, with one commenting that it was “depressing”, and another adding that there was “too much poet talk”.

4.1.2 Gender distribution (6th grade texts)
In the case of the sixth grade texts, gender distribution was more evenly distributed; only *Two Weeks with the Queen* attracted a single sex result, and that in very small numbers. It was however noteworthy that once again a plot line featuring emotional distress in the form of a young boy with cancer (*Two Weeks with the Queen*) attracted only female pupils. There was however more equal gender distribution with both *The Giver* and *Deep Water*, which suggests that an emotional reaction to a plot line is not necessarily an idea which coincides with all female pupils. The interest in *Deep Water* seemed mainly to arise from its title, inciting interest from pupils even before reading. This is a matter which I will discuss further on.

4.2 Additional results in collaboration with Skolverket’s Nu-03 report
Aside from the already established results, I was also interested in a number of other issues surrounding the reading of English literature in general. A number of these issues were previously raised by Skolverket’s report from 2003 entitled *Nu-03 – Nationella utvärderingen av grundskolan*. In one section of the report, pupils were asked to evaluate their own abilities in English and were also questioned on their interaction with English outside of school. With regard to the latter, students were asked amongst other things how well they would manage writing a letter to an English pen friend or making a telephone call to London to book a hotel room. The results in all areas showed a general increase from 1992 with regard to pupils’ self assessed abilities in English. Where the authors noted a clear improvement were areas including reading and speaking in English: “A change appears to have taken place during the last ten years that can be possibly connected to young peoples’ usage of mobile telephones and internet chatting.” (Oscarson and Apelgren 2005a, p66 my translation) One of the largest improvements since *Nu-92* was pupils’ response to questions regarding their ability to read a book in English and to understand English instructions received with a piece of equipment. In the case of the former, 69% of *Nu-92*’s pupils considered themselves to be confident enough to comfortably read an English novel, which rose to 85% in *Nu-03*. In the case of the latter, 74% of the pupils questioned in *Nu-92*
considered themselves able to read English instructions, which rose to 82% in Nu-03. With regard to the increased figures in relation to English literature, the authors suggest a possible connection to what has become known as the ‘Harry Potter effect’: “Worth pointing out is the popularity that English novels such as *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* has had amongst 15-year-olds. Many teachers, librarians and parents can testify that youths, mainly boys are keen to read these books in English instead of the translated versions.” (Oscarson and Apelgren 2005a, p67 my translation)

In light of this report, I was keen to establish if the pupils in my survey read English novels in their free time. My focus remained on English literature, and did not take into account other areas such as internet, films and music. Only one third said that they voluntarily read English books outside of school. Amongst the two thirds who answered negatively were those, who in the follow up question “What do think about reading English books” considered English to being “quite fun”, “fun when you understand”, “fun – you learn a lot” and “Completely fine – it just takes a little longer to understand.” This could be considered to be an unusually positive standpoint for pupils who have freely admitted their unwillingness to read English literature in their free time. Other opinions included “I usually have a hard time concentrating on the text because you have to understand everything”, “Good for vocabulary”, “Fine, but if you don’t understand a sentence it becomes terribly boring.”

While collecting suitable texts for my survey, I noticed that all the main characters in the books were male. This was not an intentional strategy, but it lead me to consider questions regarding protagonist gender. Is it likely that the gender of the main character has any effect on a pupil’s enjoyment of the text? One book, *Daniel Half Human* even features a male character in its title, and this particular text went on to be chosen by only male pupils. I asked what the pupils thought about reading a text where the main character is of the opposite sex. A resounding majority, 21 pupils out of 26, had no problem whatsoever with this, and a number of comments suggested that this gave an insight into how the other sex thinks and reacts in everyday situations: “It’s good. It’s like becoming a boy or a girl in some way”, “I think it is a good way to find out how they [boys] take care of things. I already know how girls think”, “I like to read about both, it’s fun to see things from the guy’s perspective.” One pupil found it hard however to be taken outside of her usual reading patterns: “Because the books I normally read have females as the main character it feels a little strange if I have to read about a boy.”
4.3 Experience from the field

“Maria” is a teacher in a compulsory school on the outskirts of central Malmö. She is a teacher with many years experience, and has been with the school both before and after its pupils were encouraged to read ‘authentic’ material in the classroom. The school is the base for some 500 pupils from grades six to nine, and the average merit rating lies at 224 points as of 2008, compared to a national average 209 points, which places the school fourth highest out of all state run schools in the county of Skåne. Maria describes the pupils as belonging to families with a slightly higher than average educational background, although the abilities of the pupils regarding their English studies are of a more traditional ‘mixed bag’ variety. The school prides itself on its more than adequately stocked library, which features more than 500 titles within English literature. Teachers implement the use of whole book studies from grade seven upwards, and since the mid 1990’s the English department have actively sought to use authentic material in their syllabus, though Maria does not recall any specific pedagogical impetus in making this decision. A number of novels were ordered in sufficient quantity to enable whole class usage. Current novels used in whole class readings are amongst others Stone Cold by Robert Swindells, Two Weeks with the Queen by David Gleitzman and The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas by John Boyne. Books are often chosen due to positive recommendations from other teachers, or are simply chosen from publishers when money is sufficient enough to buy material in large quantities. When a title is used within the classroom, it is usually the teacher who decides which book to introduce, but Maria suggested that this was because the amount of group books was usually limited to three or four titles, and that the pupils don’t usually know enough about the books in order to make a choice. It was common for a ninth grade class to either read through one book during the autumn term, and another during the spring term, or to focus on and continually return to one book during the school year. This would normally take up to four weeks, and for this period teachers would refrain from traditional textbook based lessons, to lay all their focus on the chosen book.

Maria does not see the age of the lead character as a defining problem when choosing a text for the ninth grade. Her current ninth grade class are reading Two Weeks with the Queen, and neither Maria nor her pupils had made any comment to the fact that the book has a twelve-year-old boy as the protagonist. Maria was more concerned that the language rather than the
content in a book was too easy, and has found that this book had an entirely appropriate vocabulary for her class. I mentioned that the book contains a large amount of Australian slang, but neither Maria nor her pupils had reacted negatively to this, and suggested that the humour in the book had many pupils laughing out loud, which suggests that successful and entertaining content can far outweigh any difficulties regarding unfamiliar vocabulary. Furthermore, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* features a ten-year-old protagonist, and this didn’t either affect the pupils’ enjoyment of the book, according to Maria. This book, with its theme of the Second World War’s persecution of the Jews, lent itself to some pre-reading activities in collaboration with the history teacher, who usually teaches about the Holocaust in the spring term. Following this period, Maria continues with the introduction of the book during English lessons, but is careful not to overload the pupils with too much pre-reading information; she suggests that the pupils should merely rely on the book to provide the information and the answers, and that their recent insights into the Holocaust through their history class should be enough to promote interest in the book. In other cases, pre-reading activities seem rather limited, with a discussion around the themes of the forthcoming novel as the only pre-requisite to reading it.

With regard to mid- and post-reading activities, it was not uncommon with vocabulary tests after each chapter, and also post chapter discussions or tests based on content. Another mid-reading exercise was for pupils to present the content verbally in front of the class, often after a particular chapter; this method often lent itself to discussions based on how the chapter was interpreted by other pupils. In the case of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, it was also found necessary to discuss at length the ending of the book, which provides a shockingly unexpected twist. Maria had found that a number of pupils had misinterpreted the ending of the story, and was keen to discuss these different interpretations with the pupils. It was also common for pupils to write their own reviews of books and present them for the class. Maria has several strategies to deal with problematic vocabulary. Prior to a new chapter, she will sometimes write down all difficult words to produce her own word lists, which help to provide homework exercises for the pupils, leading ultimately to vocabulary tests. On other occasions Maria helps with unknown vocabulary, often writing new words on the whiteboard, upon which she gives the pupils the chance to suggest word meaning. Then the pupils together with Maria decide which words would be useful to know, and these words are accordingly written down in the pupils’ own vocabulary work books, which after an average book can contain as much as one hundred new words.
I then asked about the gender and whether Maria had noticed any dominance of male characters in youth literature. She admitted that this had not crossed her mind, but was in agreement that female lead characters were often the exception to the rule rather than the norm. “The pupils don’t usually mention it” Maria added. This would suggest conformance with the results from my classroom survey, where the majority of pupils did not see gender as a main concern.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Maria has witnessed the positive side effects of the previously mentioned ‘Harry Potter effect’. She now regularly sees pupils, mainly boys, reading fantasy novels that contain vocabulary possibly beyond their level of comprehension. These pupils continue undeterred, keen only to lose themselves in the novel’s content. In concordance with the Nu-03 report Maria suggested that pupil’s vocabulary has “definitely become richer since the 1980’s” and adds that this is not only due to the books they read but because of the increased amount of time they spend watching TV and using the internet.
5 Discussion

5.1 Considerations

My intention with this dissertation has been twofold. Firstly, I was keen to find out if ninth grade pupils noticed any overwhelming difference between texts I regarded as suitable for the sixth grade, and those I deemed more appropriate for pupils in the ninth grade. Secondly, I wanted to investigate the exterior factors the second language teacher should be aware of when introducing such texts. Many of these factors will affect my own pedagogical strategies when introducing new texts within the classroom.

One predominating factor to consider, and perhaps the most important of all, is that no two pupils are alike. One ninth grade pupil might have a burning desire to read English literature both inside and outside of the classroom, which in turn affects his or her motivation when introduced with a new text. During the course of my teaching practice I have met many such pupils, who given the slightest opportunity would throw themselves into their English novels, and would always be keen to explain to me their current progress within their chosen book, and why they had chosen it, or why they enjoy reading particular genres. These pupils are however seen to be the exception rather than the rule. However, it is worth pointing out that the pupils in my study are familiar with authentic literature. At the start of every school day all pupils are allocated twenty minutes for reading, and an interesting mix of both Swedish and English fiction titles are brought up onto the desks. Although some pupils are keener than others in choosing to read English titles, it is fair to say that all pupils during grades six to nine encounter authentic material, whether it be introduced by the teacher or self-chosen.

My research has shown me that pupils faced with new books are affected by areas I had previously been unaware of. One of the most surprising was that even the title of a book can have a profound influence on pupil motivation. I distinctly remember the excited reaction I received when introducing Anne Turnbull’s book *Deep Water*. “Is it about sharks?!” asked one eager female pupil, “is it a kind of boating horror story?” enquired another. This level or pre-reading interest is only positive from the teacher’s point of view, but choosing suitable novels purely based on catchy titles is of course an unrealistic one (a book’s title does lend
itself however to a number of pre-reading activities, and this is a useful tool at the teacher’s
disposal. An interesting factor was that of the main character’s gender. As previously
mentioned, all texts featured in my survey featured a young male character as the lead. On
reflection, I could have made this more of a predominant issue and actively searched to re-
address the balance, finding literature featuring female protagonists - which later proved to be
a relatively easy task to administer. However, it was this original oversight that lead me to
question the role gender played in choosing texts, which provided me with some enlightening
insights. The matter of gender proved to be of little importance to the female pupils in my
survey, and lead to some positive comments suggesting an interest in finding out what was
going on in the head of the opposite sex. As a teacher I would nonetheless be keen to feature
literature featuring female protagonists as often as those featuring males. Similarly, most male
pupils questioned did not either see any problem reading texts featuring female lead
characters, and backed up the female results by suggesting that this is a way to see things
from ‘their point of view’.

The importance of scaffolding cannot be underestimated. In my classroom investigation I
deliberately provided only minimal scaffolding, encouraging response from the pupils based
on what I hoped would be a ‘top down’ reading style. Many of the texts had what I
considered to be a more direct approach, providing readers with the necessary information in
order to understand the developing plot line. It was of no surprise then that The Giver resulted
in more confusion than clarity, based on its slightly more surreal future community plot line.
Readers expecting to dive into this text and understand its surreal world were left
disappointed, and here a well planned programme of scaffolding can only benefit the long
term response to this book. As suggested by Martin and Rose, any significant indication of a
text’s content can only benefit the reader: “[f]or learners to comprehend a text, they need to
recognise its genre and field, and to have enough experience to interpret the field as it unfolds
through the text. Depending on the level of technicality it can be very easy to orient learners
to the genre and field of a text before reading it, and this is in fact what parents often do
while reading to their children” (2005, p7). Moreover, scaffolding is not unique to unfamiliar
genres, and would be beneficial to all the texts I chose to introduce. Slam can benefit from
pre-reading discussions on teenage pregnancy, Daniel Half Human can coincide with an anti-
Semitism project, Two Weeks with the Queen can encourage discussions on family loyalty,
and terminal illness. Much depends on a teacher’s prior knowledge of a book, the issues
raised within, and most importantly careful planning and execution. Given the correct
scaffolding, I feel that any book can be enjoyed by the class as a whole, and I was encouraged by the general willingness of all pupils in tackling previously unknown material, a fact that can only benefit a teacher with a well prepared schedule of pre- and post reading plans.

Another worthwhile consideration is how teachers best can capture the interest of pupils who admit to not reading any English literature outside of the classroom. Despite the majority of the pupils in my survey falling into this category, a surprising number of them appeared to enjoy reading English texts in the classroom. When looking at the results of Nu-03, it becomes clear that many pupils come into contact with English in more areas than ever before, certainly since the twelve years that have lapsed since the Nu-92 report. This falls in positively with the description of English as a school subject found within Skolverket’s course plan description: “Pupils encounter today many variants of English outside school. They meet English in a variety of contexts: on TV, in films, in the world of music, via the Internet and computer games, in texts and via contacts with English-speaking people” (2000). On reflection it is due to the results of Nu-03 that such a text can be presented with confidence by the creators of the syllabus for English.

One of the implications of Nu-03 is a deeper understanding of the amount of English that pupils come into contact with outside of the classroom. The results cover wider areas than Nu-92’s informants. Pupils surf on the internet, play video games with English soundtracks, use an increasing amount of English in computer chat rooms, and see an ever increasing amount of imported English language TV programmes. The challenge to the teacher is to encompass all of these areas, and utilise them in the classroom. For those pupils who considered reading English in the classroom to be fun, but read little out of the classroom, the teacher has to learn how to incorporate new technology in order to heighten pupils’ chances of becoming more involved in their English reading. In a discussion based report from 2008, the recent developments in pupils’ awareness of modern technology was taken up, and placed some responsibility in the hands of teachers: “A good knowledge of pupils’ activities on the Internet is important as well as knowledge of the Internet’s value regarding authentic and easily available material” (Lundberg and Oscarson, 2008, p46 my translation). A book read in class can be followed up by internet homework, where pupils could find similar books with the same themes through major book retailers, which can lead to ideas on which book to read next, either in class or at leisure. Pupils can even be encouraged to find the homepage of the author, either to promote discussion about the author’s other books, or to enable the pupils to
discuss their thoughts on the book to the author direct; a personal reply would ensure that the pupil feels that their thoughts and ideas are most definitely valid ones. Such methods would strengthen the chances of pupils becoming more involved in English literature, which in turn could encourage them to actively read English literature in their free time.

**5.2 Readability and Vocabulary**

In the initial stages of my investigation, I incorporated the use of readability formulae in order to establish a suggested reading age for my chosen texts, and as an initial indicator of vocabulary complexity. Although the results for the two programs corresponded with each other, I would be doubtful about using these as a reliable reference in the future. Texts are much more than just the vocabulary contained within. A teacher must take into consideration that the theme of the book must suit the age group (Slam being a good example), and that even texts suggested to be suitable for sixth grade classes can contain expressions and fixed phrases that such formulae fail to take into account. Graded readers are of course another option available to the second language teacher, and in my interview with Maria she added that these were sometimes used with weaker pupils, in order for them to focus on content rather than vocabulary. I would however be somewhat wary of using such texts, and believe that a greater focus on difficult vocabulary either in pre-reading or post-reading exercises gives greater unity to a class reading a book as a group project.

Paul Nation’s report *How Large a Vocabulary is Needed For Reading and Listening?* found that a vocabulary of some 8000-9000 words were required in order to obtain 98% coverage (i.e. full comprehension) of an English novel, and some 3000-4000 words were required to understand a graded reader. Nation pointed out however that many low frequency words (that is to say words that belong to fewer word ‘families’) can be typical of certain genres. In assessing the film *Shrek*, words such as ogre, swamp, donkey, dragon, and knight feature often, but these belong to low frequency word families. Nation suggested that learning these words early on would enable the reader to treat them as ‘known’ words, which remove their low frequency status. This would then technically reduce the amount of vocabulary required to gain comprehension within larger sections of text (2006, p78). In my investigation use of scaffolding was minimal. Vocabulary was taken at face level and pupils were left to construct
meaning based on their own current level of vocabulary. The implications of Nation’s report give greater emphasis to the pupil’s need for both pre- and mid reading activities. A teacher who takes the time to establish vocabulary lists either singularly or in collaboration with her pupils stands a greater chance of a book’s content reaching out to all pupils in a class (This is certainly part of the methods that Maria had established with her English classes). Furthermore, pre- or post reading focus on genre or theme can establish greater interest in a book, resulting in greater motivation on behalf of the pupils.
6 Conclusion

One of my first considerations for this dissertation was that texts aimed at sixth grade pupils would be of little interest to ninth grade pupils. When originally asking “What reaction do ninth grade pupils give after reading both ‘equal level’ and ‘below level’ texts?” I imagined there to be a clear divide between the two levels, resulting in contrasting reactions from the pupils surveyed. This proved to be untrue. Based purely on my work with readability programs, I have seen that the vocabulary in what I would consider to be sixth grade texts to be equal in syntactic qualities to those texts aimed at ninth grade readers. This may have played some part in the fact that the sixth grade texts were equally well received by ninth grade pupils, with hardly any pupils considering them to be written with a lower age group in mind. This was reflected in my interview with Maria, whose pupils in the ninth grade were happy to read David Gleitzman’s *Two weeks with the Queen* without raising any issue regarding the age of the lead character or what I originally considered to be more childish content. A number of pupils were even happy to tackle what was unbeknownst to them a work of adult fiction. Although David Chotjewitz’s *Daniel Half Human* features a thirteen-year-old boy, the vocabulary was one which I considered to be the most challenging, and this did not go unnoticed by those who chose to read it. However, the content proved to be of interest to a number of readers, and this has proven to be an important factor in a number of texts I presented.

In my second research question I asked “Which factors should the teacher consider when selecting texts for the second language classroom?” Most importantly, my research has shown me that the teacher has to be aware of the mixed abilities within the class. It is the teacher’s knowledge of her class as a functioning unit that aids the introduction of new literature. I believe that this prior knowledge can help select appropriate materials based on the general ability of the class as a whole. However, I remain convinced that pupils benefit from an element of choice, as I witnessed when presenting three texts to two classes. Quoting Giota in their report on the current state of English education in compulsory schools, Oscarson and Apelgren highlight the benefits of choice: “research shows that pupils’ interest and involvement for school assignments increases when they are given the chance to influence and make their own choices” (2005b, p85 my translation) I would however consider three
books to be unrealistic when considering a teacher’s already heavy workload, and it would be more realistic for a teacher to be ready to choose between two different work plans based on a choice between two possible books.

I found content to be a far more appropriate indicator of a book’s success within a class than any suggested age range. The content in Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* can be entirely appropriate for a both a sixth grade class or a ninth grade class, depending on how successfully the teacher incorporates pre-reading exercises into their schedule. Furthermore, as a teacher I would be aware of the gender of the main character in a book. Many pupils expressed an interest in ‘getting into the head of’ the opposite sex, and I would therefore consider it to be beneficial for teachers to actively seek out youth literature that features female protagonists as often as those with male protagonists.

I would also consider vocabulary work, both pre- and mid reading to be an important factor. It goes without saying that the very nature of reading, be it one’s own language or a second language, results in the reader meeting previously unknown vocabulary. The ability for pupils to strike a balance between focused vocabulary acquisition and a general understanding of content is however an area fraught with frustration and only too common to the EFL teacher. Harmer suggests ‘striking a bargain’ with pupils, in order for both teacher and pupils to gain from group reading sessions:

> They will do more or less what we ask of them provided that we do more or less what they ask of us. Thus we may encourage students to read for general understanding without understanding every word on a first or second read-through. But then, depending on what else is going to be done, we can give them a chance to ask questions about individual words and/or give them a chance to look them up. That way both parties in the teaching-learning transaction have their needs met (2001, p214).

Within educational settings, the level to which vocabulary remains unknown is primarily down to the effort made by both pupils and teachers alike. In my interview with Maria she suggested a number of pre- and mid reading activities which focused on vocabulary and word lists. I would suggest that it is the words that the pupils themselves find difficult to be the ones most beneficial in learning. A teacher can create word lists based on prior reading of a text, but this would generally be based on his or her experience with other classes, and would not take into account the individuality of each class. Based on Nation’s report it may however
be highly beneficial to create an initial word list that connects vocabulary with genre, in order to establish more effective acquisition of unknown vocabulary.

Finally, exterior factors such as a pupil’s contact with English outside of the classroom can not be underestimated. Despite the majority of the pupils in my investigation admitting their lack of interest in English literature outside of the classroom, a further investigation would no doubt reveal their interaction with English in a number of different areas, all reflected in the Nu-03 report. It is to the teacher’s benefit that they encompass these exterior factors and mould them into usable tools in the classroom. What are the experiences of other pupils who have read this book? Can pupil logbooks be found on the internet? Can the author be contacted on-line? Has a ninth grade class in the United Kingdom read this book? How can we get in touch with them and discuss their views? The themes of a book can create a number of areas in which the pupils can encompass their exterior contact with English; a book featuring bullying can be further aided by including a film with the same theme, or internet sites such as You Tube can be scoured for music videos featuring bullying. Any exterior source which takes into account pupils’ ever increasing contact with English outside of school can only be seen as a possible pedagogical tool to encourage a lifelong enjoyment of literature, whatever the source language.
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**Other Sources**

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Textundersökning

Kön ________

1. Vilken text läste du?
   ________________________________________

2. Ge dina spontana intryck om texten.
   ________________________________________

3. Ge en kort sammanfattning om vad du tror texten handlar om.
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________

4. Skulle du vilja fortsätta läsa boken? Ja eller nej?
   ________________________________________

5. Om du svarade ja på fråga 4, vad är det som får dig att vilja fortsätta läsa?
   ________________________________________

6. Om du svarade nej på fråga 4, vad är det som gör att du inte vill fortsätta läsa?
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________

7. Fanns det några ord, meningar eller uttryck som du tyckte var svåra att förstå?
   ________________________________________

8. Om du svarade ja på fråga 7, kan du ge några exempel?
   ________________________________________

9. Vad brukar du göra när du inte förstår ett ord i en text?
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________

10. Vad gjorde du när det förekom främmande ord i den text du precis läst?
    ________________________________________
    ________________________________________

    9-12 13-14 15-16 16+

Tack för din medverkan!
**Textundersökning**

Kön ___________

1. Vilken text läste du?
   __________________________

2. Ge dina spontana intryck om texten.

3. Ge en kort sammanfattning om vad du tror texten handlar om.

4. Skulle du vilja fortsätta läsa boken? Ja eller nej?
   __________________________

5. Om du svarade ja på fråga 4, vad är det som får dig att vilja fortsätta läsa?

6. Om du svarade nej på fråga 4, vad är det som gör att du inte vill fortsätta läsa?

7. Fanns det några ord, meningar eller uttryck som du tyckte var svåra att förstå?

8. Om du svarade ja till fråga 7, kan du ge några exempel?

9. Vad tycker du om att huvudkaraktären i en bok ibland är av motsatta kön?


   9-12  13-14  15-16  16+

11. Vad tycker du om att läsa böcker på engelska?

12. Vilka slags böcker skulle du vilja läsa på engelska?

13. Läser du engelsk skönlitteratur utanför skolan?

   _________

**Tack för din medverkan!**