

Aims and objectives in the teaching of English literature at upper secondary school

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Can literature be taught? Is there one correct way or variety of ways to teach literature and what is it that teachers at upper secondary school level in Sweden want to achieve by using literature in the teaching of English? Teachers of English literature have the possibility to realize national curricular goals of awakening their pupils' desire and interest in reading books by creating a classroom atmosphere that promotes open dialogue, develops a tolerance of different cultures and encourages the sharing of different perspectives and interpretations. But are these objectives reasonable or even attainable? What is it that teachers expect from their students? Is exposure to the target language the teachers' main aim, or is their main objective to develop students' ability to read and react to literature on an emotional level? Furthermore, what emphasis do teachers place on their students experiencing literature on a cognitive level and the mental processes that take place when reading?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and compare the aims and objectives of teachers from two upper secondary schools, regarding the teaching of English literature. My objective is also to discover what the teachers consider important, attainable and relevant for their students and how they achieve it. I carried out an empirical study based on information obtained from eight upper secondary school teachers from a small town in the middle of Sweden. The teachers were all language teachers, four of which were from a theory based school and four were from a school geared towards practical experience. Seven of the teachers were female and one was male. The teachers were given a questionnaire with 21 open-ended questions aimed at obtaining information about the National Curriculum

guideline regarding the teaching of English and English literature, their own aims and objectives when teaching English literature and student response and role.

Approaches to teaching and reading literature

National Curriculum Guideline for upper secondary school in Sweden emphasises the central role of English as a world language and its importance to students in terms of language skills and knowledge of the varying cultures in the English-speaking world. The curriculum also stresses the importance of English as a lifelong skill that can be further developed after completed schooling and the importance of students being motivated to want to improve their skills both while at school and afterwards. More specifically regarding the study of English literature, the curriculum's aim is for the students to "improve their ability to read literature in English with good understanding and reflect over texts from different perspectives" (Läroplan, 2002). The ability to read, understand and reflect on texts "from different perspectives" emphasises the curriculum's ambition to widen students' perception of the world around them. Through literature, it is believed, students gain insight, develop a sense of understanding and toleration and experience new perspectives.

In terms of *aims and objectives* generally, the inclusion of English literature in the school syllabus benefits language learning in educational, psycholinguistic and linguistic ways. According to Hill, the study of literature contributes "both to the development of the student as an individual and to his or her command of the language" (Hill 1986:12). For teachers of English as a second language, their main concern is exposure to the language. The reading of literature provides an opportunity for the language to be internalised whereby grammar rules, phrases and vocabulary already learnt can be reinforced and at the same time new words and phrases encountered. Furthermore, authentic texts give the reader a possibility to experience a genuine language context and the motivation to want to use it themselves in speech. One of the main benefits of literature is that it acts as a stimulus that ignites interest and motivates the student by involving them on a personal, emotional level (Hill 1986: 7-9).

Penny Ur presents her opinion regarding the advantages of literature teaching in her book *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory*. Ur suggests that literature is enjoyable to read, provides examples of different styles of writing while also being a basis for vocabulary expansion. Teaching literature also fosters reading skills and acts as a "jump-off" point for both writing and discussions in the classroom. Furthermore, students benefit from literature in the sense that by becoming emotionally involved, they are motivated and this in turn contributes to their personal development. Other benefits listed by Ur include the encouragement

of empathy, critical and creative thinking, increased knowledge of the target culture, world knowledge and finally, a heightened awareness of humanity and conflicts (Ur 1991: 201).

In his book *Young People Reading: Culture and Response*, Charles Sarland refers to a study regarding teachers' objectives in teaching literature done by Malcolm Yorke, who also agrees with the theory of individual development as it relates to literature. Sarland states: "Malcolm Yorke in 1977 examined teachers' objectives in teaching literature. Generally he found that teachers saw literature as fostering understanding, toleration, moral standards, love of the beautiful and as offering insight into the relationship between humankind and nature" (Sarland 1991: 5). Furthermore, Yorke's study indicated that the books teachers recommended to their students "should include themes such as death and loss, the understanding of self and society, and should be concerned with critical consideration of character, event and theme, and the evaluation of literary merit, and the study of literature should foster the development of awareness of the use of language" (Sarland 1991: 5).

American literature theorist Louise Rosenblatt also uses the verb "to foster", when discussing the teaching of literature in the sense that teachers can use literature as a way to encourage and influence their students. Literature can "foster ideas or theories about human nature and conduct, define moral attitudes, and habitual responses to people and situations" (Rosenblatt 1995:4).

The study of literature is historically associated with having the function of fostering good moral attitudes. This is a belief held by many teachers who feel that by exposing their students to good literature they will be moulded into moral and good citizens. However, the realising of this goal tends to be problematic. Teachers today are required to adapt their teaching to the individual needs of their students. At the same time, teachers feel a responsibility to collectively "foster" their pupils. Therefore, the desire to focus on the individual, as well as to collectively mould the group, poses a problem for the teachers as the two goals contradict one another. Literature may have a fostering effect on some students, but there is no guarantee that this is the case for all students and furthermore, literature does not necessarily have the fostering effect that educators would like to believe it has. Gunilla Molloy, in her dissertation *The Teacher, The Literature, The Student*, highlights the "contradictions between the teacher's purpose of using literature in the classroom and its outcome". Molloy also points out that the power of tradition is strong in the school system, which welcomes the use of some books whereas others are prevented from entering the "cultural sphere of the school" (Molloy 2002: 29).

The dilemma faced by many teachers is how to expose students to "quality" literature that helps them to attain their objectives and at the same time be

experienced as interesting and enjoyable to the student. When we speak of literature for the purpose of study, two forms come to mind. These are literature from the literary canon, and literature from current popular fiction. The literary canon often evokes connotations of all that is good and true and the study of the classics is viewed as invaluable in its role as cornerstone in the study of English literature. For students studying English as a second language it is important that they be exposed to literature from the literary canon as a way to learn about the literary background and heritage of English culture. Terry Eagleton comments on literature in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, and reminds us of the constructiveness of what is considered good literature and how views change over time and how people “may even change their minds about the grounds they use for judging what is valuable and what is not” (Eagleton 1996: 10).

Reading the classics may for some upper secondary school students seem irrelevant and out of touch with today’s world, but as Calvino suggests, exposure to classical literature does have benefits, even though young readers may not be aware of them. Furthermore, he also agrees with the belief that it is the school’s responsibility to introduce young readers to the classics. Hopefully, according to Calvino, reading the classics at school will motivate further reading outside of school for sheer enjoyment and pleasure (Calvino 1991: 6).

Popular fiction, on the other hand, is justifiably as important to the understanding and use of the target language and the culture it portrays. Students often choose literature from current popular fiction because they can relate to it on more levels than many classical novels. Some teachers are however often unwilling to use books from popular fiction on the grounds that they do not contain the same level of richness of language, or quality of moral teaching found in literature from the canon. Teachers may also reject some controversial books due to sensitive subject matter that may be disturbing or upsetting to the students. Persson (1999), in an article on cultural values, discusses a study done by Mats Trondman in 1996 regarding a project carried out at a number of primary and secondary schools between 1986 and 1991. The aim of the project was to develop and increase contact between the schools and the cultural life outside of schools. An overwhelming number of projects carried out by the schools were based on high culture with the objective to “prevent” the negative effects of popular culture whereas the absence of popular culture was very noticeable (Persson 1999: 120). Persson goes on to point out that the school needs to rethink its role as censor and realise that there is good and bad in both high culture and popular culture. Both cultures communicate values and ideologies that are attractive and unattractive, and both should have the opportunity to be discussed (Persson 1999: 136).

Teachers have varying reasons for choosing the books they do to use with their students. Their choices are motivated by the syllabus, their own preferences and also by their students.

The role of the student in the studying of English literature should be that of a participant. How a student approaches a text and his or her attitude towards reading and towards literature in general is the major determining factor as to whether the reading will be meaningful. It is the reader's response to the text that gives the text meaning and that in the end is controlled by the reader himself, as Tornberg points out (1997: 13).

Reader-response criticism is the term used to describe critical theories that focus on the response of the reader to the text rather than on the text itself as the source of meaning in a piece of literature. Reader-response criticism requires that the reader fills in the blanks in the text, and the text itself is given meaning when it is read and as the reader responds to the textual strategies. In this way the individual reader creates his or her own meaning of the text. The intentions of the author are of less importance than the thoughts, feelings, and knowledge of the reader, as well as those associations that are inspired by the text. Interpretation is also restricted by knowledge of conventions and codes. In his book *Läsa på främmande språk*, Bo Lundahl quotes the American researcher Louise Rosenblatt. Rosenblatt comments on the reading of a text as an "event involving a particular individual and a particular text, happening at a particular time, under particular circumstances in a particular social and cultural setting, and as a part of the ongoing life of the individual and the group" (Lundahl 1998: 36).

Unlike New Criticism, which stressed the text as "the sole source of evidence for interpreting it" (Tyson 1999: 118), reader-response criticism places its focus on the response of the reader, the effects achieved and the manner in which the reading of the text is manipulated by the strategies used by the author. Rosenblatt describes this responding to a text as an "event". She writes:

The special meaning, and more particularly, the submerged associations that these word and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text. (Rosenblatt 1938:32)

According to Rosenblatt, there are two approaches that can be taken to literature. One approach is directed towards the gaining of information, which she refers to as the *effluent mode*, whereby what is important is the content that gives the reader

information. Rosenblatt refers to the second approach as the *aesthetic mode*. When a reader adopts the aesthetic mode it is what the reader is experiencing during the reading of the text that is the most important (Lundahl 1998: 37). Although both forms of reading can be applied to the same text, with regard to school and the school environment, it is invariably the efferent mode that is most commonly used. Students are taught from primary and secondary school to approach texts with the intention of extracting information. Textbooks that ask the student to find the answer in the text are familiar to them, and most students are accustomed to this way of approaching a text.

Responding and reacting to a text can prove to be more difficult and more challenging to students if they are not accustomed to it. The choice of books available at school, the teacher's recommendations and the student's own personal preferences all play a role and influence what the student reads. Helping students to critically approach texts is one way, according to Robert Scholes, to "stop 'teaching literature' and start 'studying texts'". He suggests that a sceptical and questioning attitude towards texts should replace the respectful and reverent approach of the past: "In an age of manipulation, when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts" (Scholes, 1985:16).

In Scholes' view, textuality should be the object of study with the aim to develop the student's textual knowledge and textual skills:

All kinds of texts, visual as well as verbal, polemical as well as seductive, must be taken as the occasions for further textuality. And textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures that can themselves be usefully studied as codes and texts. (Scholes, 1985:16)

Questionnaire results

School's influence

The first section gives the answers to five questions regarding the *school's influence*.

1. *Are you satisfied/dissatisfied with the choice of books in English available for use at your school? Motivate.*
2. *What part do you play in the decision regarding which books in English are used in the teaching of English literature at your school?*
3. *Do you have any say in what English books are ordered for the school library?*

The teachers at School A answered that they were satisfied with the choice of books in English available at their school. According to the teachers, there were different kinds of books available, and there was something suitable for everyone, including books for individual and group reading. They have the possibility to choose their own books but pointed out that there were perhaps more books available for the weaker students than for the stronger ones. The teachers discuss together and are welcome to make recommendations and to suggest what English books should be used in the teaching of English literature. One teacher pointed out that she tries to select and read books for her students, with the “pupil’s eye”. Regarding their co-operation with the library, three of the four teachers felt that they had good contact with the library and the librarian. The fourth teacher commented that she had never been asked for advice regarding the ordering of English books, but felt confident that any suggestions she might have would be positively received.

Teachers at School B were not equally positive towards the choice of books at their school. Two of the teachers expressed satisfaction with the choice available due to the fact that books were bought specifically for their programmes, and they had the possibility to order what they wanted, whereas the remaining two teachers felt that there was not only a lack of books, but also a poor selection. The decision regarding what books are chosen is made together by the teachers, but they can rarely buy new books due to a lack of money. The one exception was a teacher from the Nursing programme who, being the only English teacher, could decide everything herself. They were however unanimous regarding their co-operation with the library. The teachers were free to suggest titles and were asked every year by the librarian about the ordering of English books.

4. *The national curriculum guidelines specify that the school in its teaching of English: **should aim to ensure that pupils improve their ability to read literature in English with good understanding and reflect over texts from different perspectives.** How do you understand “different perspectives”?*
5. *The national curriculum guidelines regarding English state that the studying of English: **aims at pupils maintaining and developing their desire and ability to learn English.** What role does the reading of books in English play in this aim?*

For the teachers from School A, “different perspectives” meant approaching a text from the language point of view, close analyses of characters, theme and setting as well as comparing and contrasting books that the students read. Furthermore, it meant looking at how the text reflects different countries and social levels. One teacher used the example of Roald Dahl’s novel *Boy* where the text could be

discussed from various points of view, for example, the boy's, the mother's, the teacher's or a modern perspective. Teachers also placed importance on students practising the ability to read and react to a text and to take part in discussions. A great deal depended however on the book in question and whether it was read individually or as a group. One teacher expressed concern as to whether her students could understand the word "perspectives" at all.

Teachers from School B responded similarly to the ones from School A in that they felt that texts should be looked at from as many perspectives as possible in order to teach the pupils to read critically and to be open-minded. The teachers commented that readers interpret texts differently if they are from different cultures, likewise depending on whether the reader is male or female. Being able to recognise the protagonist's perspective, as well as different social, physical, racial, historical and emotional perspectives was also important.

Three of the four teachers at School A agreed that literature plays an important role in the curriculum's aim, in that students develop their language and at the same time experience the pleasure of reading a book. Furthermore, if the story is good, students are motivated to learn the new words in the text. One teacher commented that although literature should play a big role, she felt it was difficult to motivate students to read books, and that it was easier to have her students watch films instead. She did however point out the importance of providing students with the "right" books, meaning books suitable and of interest to them.

Similar points of view were expressed by teachers from School B. They felt it was important for students to encounter the language in literature in order to learn vocabulary and to be exposed to different ways of expression. One teacher said: "If a student likes a book, he or she learns more with pleasure".s Another teacher hoped that by helping students to find books they like, this would improve their motivation, and make them interested to read more and subsequently learn more English. One teacher expressed frustration in that her students did not read much at all, not even in Swedish. The fourth teacher hoped that pupils would want to reach higher levels in a desire to enlighten themselves. She commented on the importance of starting from where the student is, otherwise the result could be that the student might turn his or her back on literature due to a lack of interest.

The teachers' aims and objectives

This section reports on the respondents' answers to questions related to their *aims and objectives*.

6. *What are your main aims/objectives when teaching English literature?*
7. *What methods do you use to achieve your objectives?*

8. *Describe your teaching approach when teaching English literature.*
19. *Do you adapt your teaching of English literature to your students' needs? How?*

Teachers from School A responded that their aims included language training, giving students the opportunity to enjoy the world of literature and the development of interest in reading literature. Furthermore, they hoped that by enjoying literature students would discover that their English also improved. One teacher's aim was to "wake up those who never read books". The aims and objectives of teachers from School B were to help their students learn English, to widen their knowledge of literature, to improve students' use of expressions and vocabulary and to teach them how to analyse and write about texts. They also stated the importance of developing the ability to connect literature with "certain events from different countries", helping students to be able to communicate with other people and to understand more about the rest of the world.

Methods used by the teachers at School A to achieve these objectives were to make students read as much as possible. Teachers felt it important to find books that were suited to their students and to help them to discover new and exciting ones that would enable them to develop their reading. Listening exercises was another method used, as well as individual and group discussion. Furthermore, teachers described giving a brief introduction to a text or reading the beginning of the book together with the class as a method to awaken interest. Reading about current events as well as the giving of presentations, summaries and reviews were other methods mentioned, used to achieve their objectives.

Teachers from School B responded similarly in the sense that they too used individual and group discussion, as well as book reviews as a way to achieve their aims with teaching English literature. One teacher commented that she strongly believed in "learner's autonomy", in that students are responsible for their own learning. She felt it important that her students should make their own plans and be able to choose from different activities. She did however stress that it was important that students be aware of the aims of the curriculum. One teacher responded that her methods differ from class to class depending on their ability level, whereas another teacher commented that she uses films "rather often".

In response to the question regarding their teaching approach, a teacher at School A answered that giving out questions based on the text, presenting students with ideas before and during the reading of a book, as well as discussions, were good ways to "keep the pot boiling". Another teacher felt it important to be present during the reading process, and this was especially true for the weaker readers. Other approaches were the same as methods used in the preceding question. Teaching approaches used at School B were the placing of stress on reading,

speaking, listening and writing. Using films was also an approach employed to create interest as well as group reading and discussions. One teacher pointed out the value of the teacher's own background knowledge about the books, and the ability to talk about them as being an important factor.

Regarding the question as to whether the teachers adapt their teaching of English to their students' needs, teachers at School A gave the following answers. As teachers they try to have an open dialogue, but had difficulty finding room and time for discussion. They also felt that large groups of students were a problem. Very much depended on how much interest the students themselves showed. One teacher stated that in those classes where interest was high, there was more literary history taught whereas in those classes where interest was low, emphasis was placed simply on motivating the students to read. Another teacher commented: "I don't teach very much English literature to my students".

Teachers at School B, on the other hand, seemed to adapt their teaching to a greater extent. According to the teachers, a great deal of emphasis is placed on finding books for their students which are interesting and relevant to them, such as books relating to the subject of their studies, for example cars, nursing and music. They also felt it important to find books on a suitable level for their students and fictional literature to improve their students' language skills.

10. *What are your reasons for choosing the books you do use with your pupils?*
13. *Do you encourage your students to read English books of their own choice in your class? If so, why?*
14. *In your opinion, what are the advantages/disadvantages of students choosing their own reading material?*
15. *In your opinion, what are the advantages/disadvantages of you choosing the books for them?*
16. *Do you encourage the reading of "simplified" versions of English books for your weaker students?*

Teachers at School A mentioned a number of reasons for their choice of books. They choose books that suit the particular group. They have used those books before and they "worked out well"; furthermore, books are chosen because they are suitable to individual students or have a subject matter suitable for discussions. One teacher commented: "Reading should be a nice experience," implying she felt the responsibility on her part to ensure that the books she uses in the classroom be enjoyed by her students.

Teachers at School B also commented that they try to find books suitable to the pupil's level and interest. The degree of difficulty was also a deciding factor and

that students felt that they were capable of reading a book in English. However, the most important thing was to choose books that made the students read. Filmed books and books with an exciting plot, sport and music as well as classics and romance were books most often used. Also, “modern and interesting” books could lead to interesting discussions.

Teachers from School A were very positive to their students reading English books of their own choice. They felt that the more English the students were exposed to the better. It was meaningful for students to choose themselves, because in doing so their interest was awakened and they were more likely to continue to read. The advantages of this, according to the teachers, were that students became motivated, and higher motivation often leads to increased reading. Furthermore, if the students themselves were allowed to choose, they would accept responsibility for their reading and therefore tend to take it more seriously. The teachers at School A did not feel that there were any disadvantages to students choosing their own reading material. The advantages that might be gained by teachers choosing the books for the students were that teachers could use their influence and have their students read books that they would never have chosen themselves. Being able to help students find books suitable for them was another advantage and due to the fact that many students complained that they could never find “any good books” at the library it was an opportunity to provide them with something good for them to read. One comment was that it was best if the students “don’t notice my choosing”. The only disadvantage noted was that the choice was no longer the students’ and this could affect their motivation.

School B’s teachers were also positive to students reading books of their own choice and felt that this would improve their reading and enable them to discover the joy of reading. One teacher felt that allowing students to choose themselves was the only way to make some of them read at all, whereas others (better students) were more eager to read what she, i.e. the teacher, herself suggested. It was also stressed that books chosen by the students should be suitable for their ability level. The advantages to be gained by allowing students to choose themselves were fewer than the disadvantages, according to these teachers. Although they felt that increased interest was an advantage, they did feel that students at School B tended to take the “easy way out” by choosing books below their level in English. Students often chose thin books that they were able to finish quickly with a minimal amount of effort. Teachers experienced that choosing books for them was the only way to make many students read. Furthermore, choosing for them allowed the teachers to ensure that their students did not miss out on “many a good book”. However, one teacher noted that choosing books for them often resulted in students losing interest.

Question 16 asked whether the teachers encouraged the reading of simplified versions of books for their weaker students. Teachers at School A did encourage this but only if the student was very weak and could not manage “real” books. For other students, simplified versions were used as a starting point from which the student could move on to more difficult books. One view was that it was better to read simplified versions than none at all, whereas another teacher felt it was better to recommend books suitable to students’ levels than to resort to the use of simplified versions.

Teachers at School B all encouraged the use of simplified versions as a way to get their students to read. They believed that their students would otherwise not read at all.

11. Do you think it is important that your students are exposed to English literature from current popular fiction? Why?

12. Do you think it is important that your students are exposed to English literature from the literary canon? Why?

In answer to the question regarding the importance of students being exposed to literature from popular fiction, teachers from School A responded positively. Literature from popular fiction was felt to be valuable from the language point of view as well as for the reading experience. Teachers felt that it was a means to gain knowledge about society as well as being interesting to their students. They felt that once students got “started” on popular fiction, it would be possible to interest them in reading other literature. One view held by a teacher was that it was important to avoid “streamlined” thinking and she believed the reading of popular fiction was a way to do that.

Reading literature from the literary canon was seen as meaningful by these teachers because they felt that there were certain books that their students should have knowledge about. Another teacher felt however that it was more important *that* they read than *what* they read.

Students with a stronger interest in reading should have the possibility to extend their reading of literature from the canon and as one teacher expressed it, it was good for students to experience “what the big elephants have thought and written”. Interestingly, one teacher pointed out that many students were not exposed to literature at home, and therefore it should be done at school.

Exposure to literature from popular fiction was also considered to be important by the teachers at School B. They described literature from popular fiction as being a “gateway” to other books. Furthermore, students may have heard about a current popular book and previous knowledge increases interest. It was also pointed out that the use of language changes and reflects current culture and it is important for

students to be exposed to that. One teacher was unsure as to the importance of her students being exposed to popular fiction or literature from the literary canon. The remaining teachers did however feel that literature from the canon was a way to awaken students' interest in the history of literature. One teacher felt that she wanted to make her students aware of past writers as well as well-known authors of today: "It's common knowledge and I want my students to be able to speak about these books with other people". To gain an understanding of the present through good background knowledge was yet another reason, as well as the benefits of being able to make a connection to literature studies in Swedish.

17. What are the titles of the English books you most often recommend to you students?

18. On what do you base your recommendations?

The books recommended were similar for both schools, and were a mixture of the classics and popular fiction.

School A

Boy: Tales of Childhood

Go Ask Alice

Being There

Of Mice and Men

The Pearl

Harry Potter

No Comebacks

The Great Gatsby

Johnny got his Gun

Dear Nobody

The Best Little Girl in the World

School B

Robinson Crusoe

Harry Potter

Go Ask Alice

Young Women

The Pearl

Young Mother

Of Mice and Men

Huckleberry Finn

Teachers at School A based their recommendations on their own reading, availability of books at the school, as well as books that were good for discussion and rich in emotion. They also based their recommendations on what other students had or had not recommended.

Similarly, teachers at School B also based their recommendations on availability, recommendations from other students and their own reading experience. Furthermore, one teacher also mentioned language skills and interest, as well as the desire to combine the past with the future. Teachers also recommended books that have been filmed and books that they have read themselves. However, they felt that a great deal depended on the class itself.

21. In your opinion, do you attain your objectives regarding the teaching of English literature?

One teacher at school A expressed that she did attain her teaching objectives but questioned what her students did in fact learn. The second teacher felt that she did not attain all her objectives, but did as much as time would permit. The third teacher believed she managed to fill her students with enthusiasm with regards to reading and felt that this was mainly due to her own love of reading and interest in discussing books with others. The fourth teacher however described having a “bad conscience” about teaching literature and literary history, but felt that he attained his main objective which was to make his students read.

Only one teacher at School B felt confident that she attained her objectives. The remaining three were dissatisfied or only partially satisfied with their achievements in the literature classroom. They admitted that they wanted to do a lot more, but found that they had to focus a great deal of their time on the teaching of basic language skills, and less on the teaching of literature.

Student response

- 9. In your experience, do your students respond positively to books in English?*
- 20. In your opinion, are the pupils in your class aware of the objectives of reading English literature?*

Teachers at School A all responded positively regarding their students’ response. They commented that the experience of sharing a good book is wonderful for both the student and the teacher and believed that many students enjoyed reading books in English (with the exception of the slow readers and students with problems). Students often feel a sense of accomplishment when they finish a book. In the literature class they are able to read a whole book and that they considered to be important. Further comments were that some books were “bad” for some pupils and it was vital that the students themselves could understand that.

The response from School B was less positive. Teachers there felt that students “seldom” or “sometimes” responded positively to books in English. Teachers also used phrases such as “some of them” and “very few” in answer to the question. Teachers gave reasons such as the fact that most students at School B do not like core subjects and are more interested in working with practical skills than reading books. One teacher’s view was that in both theoretical and non-theoretical schools, students and young people in general prefer to watch films instead of reading books.

She was concerned about the fact that if young people were reading less, this would also result in them using their imagination to a lesser extent.

Teachers at School A had mixed feelings regarding students' awareness of the objectives of reading English literature. One teacher felt that even though many of her students did not read literature at all, they were aware of the objectives. Another was unsure but believed that her students experienced a feeling of importance after managing to read a whole book. However, most students understood that they read English books because they realised that reading would develop their knowledge of the language: "A really good student uses language as a means to read really good books and literature".

On the other hand, teachers at School B commented less favourably. The majority of teachers did not feel that their students were aware of the objectives. One teacher commented: "I try to make them aware, but I don't think they understand". Although the teachers tried to increase students' awareness, they seemed to think that very few students fully understood the objectives of reading English literature.

Discussion

The teachers' responses to the questionnaire disclosed a number of interesting points. The responses indicated that the teachers did try to take advantage of the opportunity to awaken their students' desire and interest in reading English literature. The teaching methods used at both School A and B regarding the teaching of literature were oriented towards the individual. Students were to a large extent responsible for the choice of books, although the teachers did have an underlying belief that the choice of "good" literature would positively influence their students. Teachers at both schools placed the individual student at the centre, and put a great deal of time and energy into finding suitable reading material for each specific student. They felt it important that students should find themselves in the literature as this would give their reading meaning. It was evident from the results of the questionnaire that the teachers' biggest problem was how to motivate their students. The teachers at both schools had high ambitions for their students, wanted them to read as much as possible, both books that would be "good" for them as well as books that interested them, but had difficulty especially at School B in making their students read at all. Choosing books for students does have both positive and negative consequences. By choosing books for the students, teachers can influence the students to read what they think is meaningful; however, making choices for the students can also result in them losing interest altogether. The most striking difference between the responses from the two schools was regarding

students' motivation and ambition. At School B the students tended to be less ambitious, reading only because they had to and even then they chose books well below their level in order to make it easy for themselves. One teacher at School A was unwilling to allow her students to read easy, "simplified" versions of books that would have been lacking in quality and richness of language and found books instead that were suited to the particular students' levels. The teachers from School A experienced their students to be more motivated and more aware of the objectives of reading English literature than those at School B.

The teachers in the study tended to have an instrumental approach to literature, whereby it was used to improve language skills and for the sheer pleasure of reading. The teachers used literature as a jump off point and as a means to another end such as discussion. Literature was not however used as an object of study in itself, and there appears to be an absence of discussion around literary aspects such as genre, interpretative processes and literary strategies. The teachers tended to put most of the responsibility on the students and their experience of the literature and less on themselves and the actual teaching of the literature. By allowing the students to make their own choices teachers hoped that it would have a positive effect on them and motivate them to want to read more. They also hoped that the literature they read would "foster" them and strengthen moral character. Teachers from both schools stressed the importance of the connection between reading and writing in that literature acts as a stimulus for impressions and ideas. Writing about a text makes it possible to organise and express those thoughts and at the same time promotes learning (Dysthe 1996: 92).

Lack of money was another problem mentioned by the teachers at School B. Most of the teachers there were unable to buy the books they wanted for the teaching of English literature and it is likely that a poorly stocked library has a negative effect on the students, especially if they are unmotivated to begin with. Whereas money did not seem to be a problem at School A, time and the large number of students in the classes were problematic and at least one teacher expressed frustration in trying to give her students the time and attention they needed.

Motivating students to want to read is a difficult task, as is attaining the ambitious but vague objectives stated in the national curriculum. Teachers try to fulfil these objectives, to foster moral attitudes and an understanding of self that hopefully results in students being enriched and enlightened. Furthermore, it is hoped that students develop a desire to want to continue to read books in English and realise the importance of English both in and outside the classroom. In reality however, teachers have to put most of their time and energy into focusing on basic language skills and are satisfied when a student simply agrees to read a book. There

appears to be a discrepancy between the goals of the curriculum, the actual teaching situation in the classroom and what the teachers can achieve with their students. This can explain the feeling of failure experienced by most of the teachers in the study. Vague phrasing of goals in the curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to know how to approach teaching literature and what methods they should use to do so. The teachers in the study tended to use literature more as language training and less as an area of study and knowledge, often limiting themselves to old-fashioned methods that did not allow for diversity in other areas.

It is believed that the study of literature “begins in delight and ends in wisdom” (Hill 1986: 7). This conviction strengthens the view that literature is not only unending in its capacity to teach, but is also a lifelong source of enjoyment. It would seem, however, that the studying of English literature can result in students feeling frustration and boredom. Students often lack a sense of relevancy, are unmotivated and uninterested. It is important that teachers maintain a balance between teaching the text and allowing pupils to find their own meaning, and ultimately enjoyment, in the books they read. Undoubtedly, the main obstacle faced by teachers today is how to motivate students to want to read in the first place.

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