Reading in the English classroom
A comparative study of attitudes to literature in vocational and academic programs in the first year of upper secondary school in Sweden

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Being able to read and write different kinds of texts in English is more important than ever, and previous research has shown that the latter of those two skills benefits from the former. The importance of reading is stressed in the curriculum for upper secondary education. The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of English literature at upper secondary school. Similarities and differences in attitudes towards literature among students in vocational and academic programs in the first year will be looked into. I wish to get an idea of how students experience literary studies in their English education. Further, I want to investigate the students’ own ideas on how to best make literary studies interesting and a good tool for learning. The results show that the academic program students read more often in their spare time, and also that they enjoy reading to a higher degree than the vocational program students. When it comes to practicing reading literature in English lessons in school, both groups think that they do this seldom and a slight majority of both groups are satisfied with this. However, nearly half of the academic program students and nearly a quarter of the vocational program students would like to read more in school. Moreover, it seems that academic program students see more advantages in literary studies for acquiring a second language, whereas the vocational program students do not know if literary studies are a good way of learning English or gaining knowledge of the English culture. Previous research has shown that students are not likely to find a task, such as reading literature, worth doing if they are not motivated in ways that make them understand the advantages that the task will provide. My conclusion is therefore that it is important that teachers strive to motivate their students in such a way. Further, it is important that teachers consider that even though students do not read a great deal in their spare time, they might still want to do so in school.
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Appendix 1 – Questionnaire (Enkät)
1. Introduction and aims

Reading and the ability to analyze and understand literature is indicated by previous research (Nation, 2009:49) to have a great impact not only on students’ reading skills, but on other areas of English learning as well, particularly writing. This makes reading a great tool for acquiring a language. In English education at Swedish schools today, the importance of being able to read different types of texts in English is accentuated, and through these texts students are expected to acquire cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries (Skolverket, 2000). This indicates that when reading literature, it is important to do so in a way that makes students reflect on the society described in the text.

Analyzing literature in a way that stimulates students to think critically, however, requires that the teacher has proper training in literature teaching; otherwise it can lead to anxiety, and the teacher not knowing what to teach. Even though English at upper secondary school does not include literary theory studies in the same way as English at University does, the points that Showalter (2003:5-7) makes about higher level of English literature studies might be applicable to upper secondary teaching as well. That is, teachers need knowledge and training in teaching literature in order to avoid anxiety. This type of training together with opportunities to prepare for lessons needs to be improved still today (Showalter, 2003:5-7).

Further, when studying literature at upper secondary school, it is of great importance to map out students’ attitudes towards reading literature as it has been shown that the results of teaching are greatly affected by the students’ motivation.

The aim of this study is to inquire into the attitudes towards the use of literature in English teaching at upper secondary school in Sweden. I want to see if there are any differences in attitudes towards literature between vocational and academic programs in the first year, and get an idea of how students experience their English education. I also want to see the students’ ideas on how to best make literature studies interesting and a good tool for learning.

2. Background

When discussing literature and how it can be used for educational purposes, a definition of the term would seem appropriate. However, according to Showalter (2003:21-22), this is difficult since the definition of literature differs depending on who is asked, and specific features that can be applied to all literary works do not exist. Thus, the definition of literature in this essay may very well differ from that of other studies, and it will focus on the areas thought to be most relevant for the study at hand.
The definition Showalter (2003:22) uses for literature includes “fiction, poems, plays, or critical essays” and this is what will be meant throughout this essay as well when referring to literature.

2.1 The syllabus on reading in English education at upper secondary level

In Swedish upper secondary education there are three levels of English: A, B and C, with an additional level where the Cambridge-test is the main content of the syllabus and the course for the most part consists in practicing for that test. The first course, the A-course, is obligatory for all programs, whereas the B-course is mandatory for specific programs and voluntary for others, and the C-course is an elective.

The A-course syllabus is the same for all programs, which means that the goals of vocational and academic programs are identical. The English syllabus for Swedish upper secondary education emphasises that students should be able to read and understand different types of texts and also through literature and fiction acquire cultural knowledge from English-speaking countries (Skolverket, 2000).

2.2 The value of reading in the process of learning to read ESL

Reading is not only a matter of understanding single letters or words, but also understanding the meaning of a text as a whole, and in order to understand a word, the best way is to put it into context, that is, learning to interpret the text in its fullness (Smith, 2004:3-4). Regarding children with reading difficulties, the best way to aid those children is not to postpone actual reading in order to practice single words, letters or sounds. Instead “letters (and their phonic interrelations) are recognized and learned best when they are parts of words, and words are recognized and learned more easily when they are in meaningful sequences” (Smith 2004:224). This would mean that when teaching children in school to read, it is not always effective to teach students a great many words before taking on the task of reading texts.

When learning to read English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL), there are some differences compared to first language learning that need to be considered. Even though there can be English loanwords in that language, this is a connection that a new learner does not usually grasp. Because of this the texts need to be more carefully selected for second language learners of English than would be necessary for a native speaker of English learning to read (considering that the latter already knows up to approximately five thousand words) (Nation, 2009:18-19).

Apart from previously mentioned challenging factors, a learner of ESL/EFL can have benefits from already knowing one language. If the reader’s first language is alphabetic,
he/she will have an advantage as they already know the connection between letter and sound, they will also benefit from knowing that putting letters together makes up words. If the letters look the same he/she will have an advantage over someone whose first language has different looking letters compared to the English ones (Nation, 2009:18-19).

Urquhart & Weir remind us that even if an L2 (second language) learner has a first language that is alphabetic, he/she has to be literate, meaning know how to read, in order to have previously mentioned advantage. Further, Urquhart & Weir (1998:33) point out that the relationship between the languages affects the learning. Some languages may share similar features, whereas other combinations might not. One other factor that plays a big role when learning another language is the cultural relationship between the L1 and L2 countries. Readers that have insight into the culture of the L2 bring more shared experiences into the texts. Using literature from other cultures to discuss cultures can hence give further meaning and experience for children that they can use when they read in the future.

2.3 Past, present and future approaches to analyzing and teaching literature

When having the skill to read in an L2, technically speaking, reading texts can be the object of pleasure and analysis in literary studies. The fact that the goals of teaching English literature have changed over time, has resulted in different approaches to, and ways of teaching, literature. Even if the main part of English literary studies take place at universities in Sweden and not at upper secondary level, teachers are educated at universities, so what is being taught there filters down in the system and indirectly affects upper secondary school teaching as well. This is the reason why it might be good to know how some of the developments in the English-speaking countries have affected literature studies in those countries, and in turn, how that has affected the way of teaching English literature at university level in Sweden.

In the past, literature studies (in this case English) were a way of trying to influence people to become what was considered “better human beings and better citizens” Showalter (2003:22). According to Norling (2009:35), teachers still hold the belief that good literature can provide students with good morals. This, however, can be problematic since school-curricula today focus on the individual students’ development and needs, and the teaching has to be adapted to fit those criteria, while trying to impart a collective set of morals and attitudes on a group is contradictory to the first goal. Furthermore, Norling states that literature might not have the desired effect of developing the morals of students even if that might be the case for some (Norling 2009:35). Even though the belief that the purpose of literature is to foster good citizens is still held by teachers today, it is not as common as it has been in the past.
English literature studies quickly changed from being seen as unimportant in the 1920s to being thought of as the only thing really worth studying in the 1930s (Showalter, 2003:22-23). From the 1940s, literary theory began to develop and in the 1980s it was considered the main focus of literary studies at university level. At the same time one could see an increasing fear of literary theories, that is, theories were (and still are by many) thought to deprive readers of pleasure in, and their own interpretation of, literature. Tyson too expresses having come across this issue in the form of students (at university level) fearing that they will “[lose] the intimate, exciting, magical connection with literature that is our reason for reading it in the first place” (Tyson, 2006:1) if theory is applied to literature. However, she addresses this fear, saying that “there is no such thing as a non-academic interpretation” (Tyson, 2006:4). She also states that the readers will value literature even higher as their understanding of critical theory increases, because then all the elements in a text can be better understood. If this is the case in general, also students at upper secondary level would benefit from literary theory.

Showalter (2003:24) also argues for the benefit of literary theory saying that no matter what elements of literature that a teacher finds central, they will all agree that learning for life, and not only for educational purposes, is important. She argues that even if a unified definition of literature is difficult to accomplish, the teaching practice in itself and learning theory can be the goal in literary studies in the future. Since literary theory is considered an important goal at university level, where teachers of English are educated, this might affect the upper secondary classroom as well.

### 2.4 Intensive and extensive reading in literary studies

When studying English as an ESL/EFL, there are many different approaches, apart from literary theory, to reading literature, and two central concepts that need explanation are intensive and extensive reading. The first, according to Nation (2009), is when each sentence in a text is examined very thoroughly and discussed in the learner’s first language to understand the exact meaning. Combined with others, this can be a good method for acquiring a language, as it primarily focuses on the grammatical translation and comprehension of a specific text. However, if only this type of text study is done, the result might be that the reader cannot apply the knowledge to other texts (Nation I.S.P 2009:25).

An advantage that can be seen from intensive reading is that when deciding on what texts to use and then working with them, the teachers can control what parts of the language will be focused on in a course. They can also more easily show students the way that structures in the language contribute to the meaning of a text, and when choosing specific texts, they do not
have to consider, for example, conflicting grammar and vocabulary. However, there are also obvious negative sides of intensive reading; for instance, very long texts must be avoided. This in turn hinders the interpretation and understanding of a literary work as a whole, which Smith said was the best way to learn a language (2004:3-4). Thus, it is difficult to use this type of reading solely when working with literature. Another drawback is that specific texts with specific topics tend to give examples of a certain type of vocabulary and grammar, and hence the result might be that tools for studying different kinds of texts are not provided (Nation, 2009:26).

Extensive reading methods, on the other hand, have a focus meaning rather than language. This means that texts that have a small number of new grammatical features and unknown words can be chosen so that reading does not become interrupted by difficult features of the language. This is a good way for students to practice fluency and focus on the actual meaning of the text, and hence, seems to be better suited for extensive literary studies. What needs to be remembered when using this method is that when reading, students might focus so much on the activity of reading that they forget to think about features to learn. Therefore it is suggested that one should make sure that the students do a great deal of reading so that vocabulary repetition is practiced extensively (Nation, 2009:50).

A combination of extensive reading (for the most parts), and intensive reading (for difficult parts) of literary texts appears to be a good mix. Positive features of both methods combine to enhance linguistic knowledge as well as an understanding of the larger context.

2.5 The role of literature in language acquisition

Reading can be an end in itself, that is, reading for the purpose of pleasure or to improve language skills. However, studying literature can have other purposes that are well worth mentioning, as the benefits in other areas are great. Through studying literature students can learn new, or consolidate already known, vocabulary and grammar, which in turn also improves writing, and they can also gain knowledge of the world. One other great advantage is if students experience satisfying results and become positive about learning; they might want to continue studying language in the future (Nation I.S.P. 2009:49).

The study of literature has beneficial effects that transcend the purely literary realm. Since it can evoke interest in learning (in general), and the will to study language (in particular), it can be used as a motivating factor. However, this advantage of literary studies does not come without familiarizing students with the area. Since many students are unaccustomed to reading today, this requires knowledge of how best to motivate students’ reading.
There is no single definition of motivation. Generally speaking, motivation calls for some kind of activity, either mental, that is, involving decision-making and planning, or physical, requiring effort and action. Further, motivation is strongly connected to goals, striving for, or trying to avoid something. Even though goals can change over time and along with a person’s experiences, they are important in the activity that motivation requires (Schunk et al 2008:5).

Connected to goal-setting is the concept of self-efficacy, meaning that one’s choices are affected by thoughts on one’s own capability. In other words, if someone is confident in their self-efficacy, he or she believes in the implementation of a task, and hence is more likely to try something new than a person with low self-efficacy in regard to the same task might be. This means that teachers need to make students believe that they can complete different tasks (e.g. literary studies), and moreover provide the tools needed to do so.

The two concepts, goals and self-efficacy (for reaching those goals), are both important because they will make students more willing to participate in activities that will help them attain what they want (Schunk et al 2008:139,142). Students who have both goals and are confident in their self-efficacy are more likely to “attend to instruction, rehearse information to be remembered, expend effort, and persist” (Schunk et al 2008:142), making goal-setting and self-efficacy very valuable in the processes of studying English literature, as well as other areas in school.

Motivation is also connected to systems of reward or punishment for accomplishing or failing to accomplish something. However, even though such external motivation can work for some students, and even though most schools use that method, far from all benefit from such methods of motivation (Sullo 2009:36). As humans are not driven mainly by motivational factors from the outside, but by internal ones, it is according to Sullo (2009) important to have knowledge of motivation in relation to behavior to be successful in teaching as well as other interactive situations. Changing the external methods of motivation in school to internal methods is here seen as necessary and it demands some effort since one has to understand the psychology that lies behind human behavior. This begins with understanding the human drives that range from the basic needs for survival, to safety, and on to more self-fulfilling ones (Sullo 2009:37-38). The strength of different needs differ between people and this is partly why specific activities when learning works well for some, and not at all for others. If someone for instance has a strong need to feel safe, they are less likely to take risks in the classroom (Sullo 2009:40). This means that before the teacher can expect students to dare to express their thoughts on a literary work, they need to feel comfortable, and find it enjoyable to do so. This in turn can be difficult when they are not used to literary studies.
In Schunk (2008) the concepts of taking part in an activity for the pleasure of doing so is referred to as intrinsic, and in contrast, motivation derived from reaching a goal, and reward or the attempt to avoid punishment here means extrinsic. It is pointed out that what belongs to a person’s intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can differ and change over time. Something that a person does for enjoyment, with intrinsic motivation, may change into extrinsic motivation, for instance if a person learns that money can be made out of that specific exercise (Schunk 2008:238). It could also be the other way around: if a student for extrinsic reasons, such as a grade, tries and gets positive experiences from literary studies, they themselves may feel motivated to continue merely because they feel that they are good at it and find it enjoyable.

As stated in previously examined research, students can learn by being driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons of motivation. However, “[...] working on a task for intrinsic reasons is not only more enjoyable, there is also evidence that across grade levels, intrinsic motivation relates positively to learning, achievement, and perceptions of competence, and negatively to anxiety” (Schunk 2008:238). And other than being keener to work hard, students get higher self-efficacy, that is, they think better of their own capability when it comes to new tasks. They become more eager to try new things, see their own progress, and experience the results; they become more positive towards further learning. Hence intrinsic motivation is considered best for learning (Schunk 2008:38), and therefore, if the teacher can make students discover the pleasure of studying literature, they might continue reading on their own as well.

3. Method
3.1 Design
The study took place at an upper secondary school in a town located in the middle of Sweden. As mentioned before, students from both academic and vocational programs were asked to participate in order to see if there were any differences in the answers between the two groups. The method I used was quantitative in the form of questionnaires (see appendix 1).

The focus of the questionnaire was on students’ opinions on literature in general, their experience of working with literature in school, what they think that they can learn from literature, and the students’ own ideas on how to best work with literature.

3.2 Sample
When selecting the students for my study, I chose classes at a school that offers both academic and vocational programs. This was partly to minimize the risk of different schools having different policies of teaching (something that might affect their work with English
literature), and partly because of the convenience of doing the study without having to travel far between the scheduled meetings with each class.

Four vocational program classes and two academic programs classes were asked to participate. The number of classes from each type of program differs because vocational program classes are smaller and I wanted to end up with approximately the same number of students from the two types of programs. In each class there were a few students that could not attend when the questionnaire was handed out for various reasons. The dropout at this stage was considered to be of no great importance since this did not affect the proportion between the two types of programs. The questionnaire was filled in by 107 students in total, of which 55 attend vocational programs and 52 attend academic ones.

3.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of an introduction informing each student of the general subject of the survey, namely to investigate their opinions of literature in their English education and in their free time. It also declared that participation was voluntary, and that they could opt out at any time without being questioned why. In the last part of this short introduction, I requested that they should give answers as honestly as they could.

The entire survey, the introduction as well as the questions, was written in Swedish. This was because the questionnaire was not intended to test their understanding, but to get as reliable answers as possible by avoiding misunderstandings as some of the terms are difficult enough in the students’ first language. A further reason was that at the end of the questionnaire there were two open-ended questions, and by being allowed to write in their first language, students would feel more comfortable writing and giving suggestions.

In the questionnaire there were mainly two types of questions, seven of each. The first type was multiple-choice questions, and here students were told to circle all answers they thought agreed with their own opinions. This meant that there could be more than one answer to each of those questions. For the second type of question, the closed ones, there was rating. As in question 2b (see appendix 1), How often do you read fiction that is not a school-assignment? where the possible answers were Every day, Often, Rarely, and Never. The students were here asked to circle only the one option they thought was closest to their opinion.

Since these two types of questions were closed (and semi-closed), there was a need for the students to be able to say something in their own words at the end of the questionnaire. So in addition, as mentioned above, there were two open-ended questions at the end. In the first question, they were asked to give examples of how they wish to work with literature in
English lessons in school. In the second, they could express if they thought that something they found important about English literature studies had been omitted.

As the assembling of the results began, I realized that my definition of literature varied for different questions throughout the questionnaire. For the first question I wanted the students’ own definition so that is why I use the broad term there. However, for the rest of the questionnaire it is clear that some misunderstandings could have occurred. In the beginning I ask about fiction (skönlitteratur in Swedish), which is what was meant to be the central topic of the entire questionnaire. Later on, the first part of that word is omitted, and that, in Swedish, results in the broader term literature (litteratur). This is unfortunate; nevertheless, the results should be regarded as measurable because of the answers that the students gave on the first question. The students, according to this question, think that the concept of literature mainly concerns novels, poems, and plays, which indicates that they think of fictional literature. Therefore, when the broader term is used later on, it is probable that the students still think of fiction, as this is in line with their own definition of what literature is. Although not likely, it should still be pointed out that this fact could have altered the result of a few questions to some extent.

3.4 Procedure
In the lesson before the survey, the students’ regular teacher in the respective classes informed them about the upcoming survey and also told them that it concerned their thoughts on English literature. In each class, the survey was done at the beginning of that lesson to minimize the risk of someone not filling in every question because they wanted to end earlier, which might have been the case if it had been filled in at the end of the lesson. I began by telling the students who I was, and what I was doing there. Then told them everything I had written in the introduction of the questionnaire so that everyone would receive the same information. As the students filled in the answers, I helped them with technical questions about how to fill in, and also with words they did not understand. Apart from this, the students were provided with little information since I did not want to steer their thoughts.

3.5 Process
All the 107 pupils’ closed questions were entered into Microsoft Excel in order to achieve clarity in the results.

The closed questions were of two types. For the first type of closed questions, where the answer could be more than one alternative for each, a value of one was given for each specific answer that the student had circled and a zero if the specific answer had not been circled.
However, for the second type, where the students were to give a rating answer, their choice was given a number. This number was between one and four for questions with four alternatives, and between one and five for questions with five alternatives.

The processed data were analyzed to find mean values for different variables, which in turn were recalculated into percentages. In search of correlation or variation in the answers, the analysis focused on answers in relation to type of program. Further analysis examined the correlation between the students’ views on the benefits of reading literature in the English classroom and their views on the effects of reading literature on their English language acquisition.

When analyzing the material, I realized that the option Don’t know, for the multiple choice questions may have tempted the students to take the easy way out by marking that choice, especially since I put it first on purpose as I did not want to influence the students into thinking something that they did not, but the option should perhaps have been omitted altogether for some questions.

4. Results and analysis
The results will be presented in the following manner: First the students’ own definition of literature will be given, something that turned out to be central for the survey as the definition given by me differed on occasions. Then the students’ own opinions of their habits of reading fiction in their spare time as well as in school will be presented, followed by how much they want to work with English literature in school. After that, the result section will show the students’ views on whether, and in what ways, literature develops their English skills and cultural knowledge. Finally, the students’ thoughts on how best to work with English literature in school will be presented. In the following, I will refer to the academic program students as AP students and the vocational program students as VP students.

4.1 The students’ definition of literature
The students’ definition of literature was investigated through a multiple-choice question where the students circled all the options they found suitable for the definition of literature. The percentage therefore goes from 0-100 for each question, meaning that the total percentage in the diagram extends 100.
All 107 students (52 AP and 55 VP students) answered the first question. Figure 1 shows that the category *Novels* (circled by 94.2% of AP students and by 71.2% of VP students) stands out among the alternatives. However, the number of students marking *Poems* as being literature was also fairly high (59.6% and 50.9% respectively). We can see that the options (what they think is literature) have generally been circled to a higher degree by AP students in more cases than by VP students, apart from two options, namely *Critical Essays* and *Newspapers*, which more VP students than AP students include. It is clear, however, that both AP and VP students regard the first three fictional options as literature to a higher degree than the other options. This means that is reasonable to assume that fiction is what the students have in mind when they answer the following question where the broader term literature is used. This is why I will use fictional literature/fiction throughout the essay although the term literature was also used in the questionnaire. On the occasions where this is not possible, it will be pointed out clearly.

### 4.2 Students’ reading habits in their spare time

The students’ habits of reading fictional literature (understood from the students’ answers to the first question) in their spare time was investigated in order to see if there are any differences in the amount of reading and attitudes towards reading at home, compared to when they study fiction in school. The two pie charts below show the extent to which AP and VP students read in their spare time.
As can be seen, there is a clear difference in the percentage of VP students that read fiction often compared to AP students. No VP student does so every day, and there is a rather low rating also for the AP students. There is, however, a great difference in the rating of reading habits as *Often*: 1.1% for the VP students and 42.3% for the AP students. Looking at the alternative, *reading Seldom*, the percentage is exactly the same for both student categories (36.4%), but for the alternative *Never*, there is again a big difference between the two student categories. A high percentage of VP students state that they *Never* read (61.0%), compared to AP student (13.5%).

There was a follow up question on how often the students read, where they answered in which language they do their spare-time reading. Here the students could mark, *Swedish*, *English* and *Other*, and this is the reason why the total percentage for AP students exceeds 100 (some of those students marked both Swedish and English). The result shows that the biggest difference between the AP and VP students who read fiction in their spare time is to be found in the activity reading in *English*. AP students read more in English (60.5%) than VP students (12.5%). The most frequent reading for all takes place in the first language Swedish (97.7% AP and 83.3% VP). Both types of programs gave low percentages to the option *Other* (AP: 2.3% and VP: 4.2%).

The students were also asked if they enjoy reading fiction, and there are obvious differences in the answers between AP and VP students as shown in the pie-charts below (figures 5 and 6). For those of the students that marked that they sometimes like to read, no great difference can be seen between the two types of programs. However, when it comes to
the alternative with the largest percentages in each group, 46.2% of the AP students answered yes (that they do like to read), whereas 43.6% of the VP students answered no (that they do not like to read). Further, the situation is reversed when looking at the lowest percentages in each group. In the AP student group there is only a low percentage of students that answered the question with a no, and in the VP student group the lowest percentage was given to the alternative yes. The alternative Don’t know (slightly negative alternative on the scale) yielded a higher percentage for VP students (25.5%) compared to the AP students (13.5%).

![Pie charts showing reading habits of AP and VP students](image)

4.3 Frequency of reading English literature in school

When investigating the students’ opinions on the reading of fictional literature (here too understood from the students’ answers in the first question) in the English classroom, different types of questions were used, and in tables 1 and 2 the results of the questions are shown.

| Table 1. Students’ estimation of how often they read fictional literature in their English classroom |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Alternatives** | **Percentage of AP students** | **Percentage of VP students** |
| Every Lesson (4) | 3.8              | 0               |
| Often (3)        | 21.2             | 3.6             |
| Seldom (2)       | 71.2             | 70.9            |
| Never (1)        | 3.8              | 20.0            |
| No answer        | 0                | 5.5             |

In Table 1, it is clear that the highest percentage of students from both types of programs estimate (emphasis on the fact that this is their opinion) that they seldom work with fiction (71.2% and 70.9%). However, there are differences in the other alternatives; more VP
students experience that they never read literature (20.0), whereas close to the same percentage of AP students estimate that they often read literature (21.2). For the low percentages too, opposite relationships between the two student groups can be observed.

Table 2. Students’ opinions of the frequency of reading fictional literature in their English classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternatives</th>
<th>Percentage of AP students</th>
<th>Percentage of VP students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Much too Seldom (5)</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little too seldom (4)</td>
<td>36.5</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good as it is (3)</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little too often (2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much too often (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When it comes to the students’ opinions of how much they would like to work with English literature, the question was phrased in such a way that they answered by ranking if they think they work with it much too seldom, a little too seldom, and so on. There is a strong indication that a majority of both student categories think that they work with fiction just as much as they wish to. A higher percentage of AP students would like to work more with fiction compared to VP students. Even so, we can note that the percentage of VP students that have chosen the alternatives that literature is used A little too seldom or Much too seldom is higher than the percentage yielded for A little too often, Much too often as well as No answer. Thus, indicating that also students in this group want to work with literature more than they do today. It also means that out of those who read fiction seldom in their spare time (Figure 2) there are still some who think that that there should be more of such activities in school.

The ways that fictional literature in English is worked with today, according to the students, was investigated by a multiple-choice question, where the students circled the alternatives they found suitable, shown in table 3 below.

Table 3. Ways of working with fictional literature in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternatives</th>
<th>Percentage of AP students</th>
<th>Percentage of VP students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk about what happened in the text</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write about what happened in the text</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatize what happened in the text</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Use the literature as inspiration to write own texts  
Reflect on how society (norms, values, politics) where the author lives/lived affects the text’s contents. Then talk/write about that.
Other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>AP students (%)</th>
<th>VP students (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word knowledge</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar knowledge</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows that both AP and VP students rate that they work with literature mostly by *talking about what happened in the texts* they have read (96.2% and 56.4%), followed by *writing about what happened in the texts* (53.8% and 40.0%).

VP students *dramatize and use the texts as inspiration* more than AP students, whereas the latter show a higher percentage for the activity of *reflecting on the impact of society on the contents of literature*. Comments that were given from VP students when marking the alternative *other* was: “don’t know” (the same for all of them).

### 4.4 The benefits of studying fictional literature

The benefits that students could see of reading fictional literature (as understood from question number one) were looked into through three multiple-choice questions and one ranking question. In the multiple-choice questions the students were once again given alternatives on things that might make literature studies advantageous (so the total percentage exceeds 100). The first question investigated what language skills, and possibly cultural knowledge, that students think improve through reading. Here one cannot say that the students think of fiction as the question refers to reading in general. However, there are still differences between the two programs that are of interest concerning the students’ opinion on skills developed through reading in general.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills improved</th>
<th>AP students (%)</th>
<th>VP students (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar knowledge</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over all, AP students had higher percentage on all options except for *Don’t know* and *Nothing*. The alternative that received the highest percentage from both student categories (even though big differences in percentage between the two can be seen) was *word-knowledge* (94.2% and 63.6%), followed by *reading skills* (90.4% and 54.5%) and *writing skills* (87.8% and 34.5%). Hardly any students marked the alternatives *Nothing* and *Other*, but more VP students than AP students marked the alternative *Don’t know*.

When the students were asked to consider if they learn something about a country’s real (non-fictional) culture by reading fiction, the percentage was overall higher for AP students again. The VP students had their highest percentage (more than twice the percentage compared to the other group) on the alternative *don’t know*, (56.4% versus 23.1% for the AP students). Higher overall percentage for the other alternatives means that AP students think that this type of authentic knowledge about a country and its culture can be found out by reading fiction. Out of all the alternatives that can be found in question number 7 in the questionnaire (appendix 1), AP students had the highest percentage for the alternatives history (59.6%) and traditions (57.7%).

Further, the students’ thoughts on whether or not literature studies provide them with knowledge in the area of literature were investigated (question 8, appendix 1). The percentage was still higher for AP students but the two student categories had the same two alternatives at the top. The alternative with highest percentage from both student categories was *Become better at understanding plots in texts* (AP students 84.6% and VP students 61.8%). This was followed by *Become better at understanding different styles such as irony, hyperbole, metaphors* (AP students 69.2% and VP students 40.0%). The option *Better at determining genre in texts and media*, and *Better at literary history* were still rated fairly highly by the AP students with 55.8% for the first and 5.0% for the latter. VP students did not choose these alternatives to the same extent (18.2% and 36.4% respectively).

The multiple-choice questions were followed by a graded question. It investigated the students’ opinions regarding if reading and analyzing fiction (again, as the students in the first question answered that fiction is what they associate with literature) is a good way of acquiring a second language.
Figure 6. AP students’ and VP students’ opinions regarding if reading and analyzing literature promote second language acquisition.

In the figure above there are distinct differences between the two student categories. Since this was a question where students graded their answer, the bars for each student category add up to 100%. A high percentage of AP students evidently see the advantages of literature studies for acquiring a second language (65.4%), while most of the VP students do not know if there are any (43.6%).

The second highest percentage in figure 6 is the same for both student categories and also given to the same alternative, that is, Sometimes.

4.4.1 Society and literature
In order to further investigate the effects of fictional literature, three graded questions were asked about the students’ opinions on the impact of society on literature (questions no. 10, 11, 12 in appendix 1). There were few differences between the student categories. In both categories a high percentage of students thought that society affects what authors write about (76.3% of the VP students answered yes or sometimes, and 98.1% of AP students).

Many students also agreed that they Sometimes reflect on how societies and people are represented in literature (VP students 38.2% and AP students 46.0%), but as many as 29.1% VP students and 26.9% AP students answered No to the question if they reflect on the representation of society and people in literature. Compared with the previous question, it is clear that even though the students realize that society plays an important role in writing and
interpreting literature, it is by most rated as something they do not at all or only sometimes reflect on in school (3.6 of the VP students and 11.5% of AP students).

To the question if they think they get knowledge that will affect their grade positively by reflecting on societies and people in literature, few of the students in both categories said No. However, the highest percentage of the VP students answered that they Don’t know (45.5%), whereas the main part of the AP students said Sometimes (36.5%). Second highest percentages for the two student categories differed as well in that 21.8% of the VP students answered Yes to this question (I do get knowledge that affects my grade positively), while the second most favoured answer for AP students was, Don’t know (32.7%).

4.5 Students’ ideas on how best to work with literature
The students answered two questions on how they want to work with literature (even though text might have been a better term to use) in school, the first one was multiple choice and the second was open-ended. The first looked into what type of literature to use, which again shows that the students really think of fiction when they are asked about literature. The complete results of this question are shown in the diagram below.

![Graph showing the type of texts students want to work with in school]

Figure 7. AP and VP students’ opinions of what type of literature they wish to read in the English classroom.

If a student marked All texts in English, all options were given the number one. The result shows that most AP students want to work with Novels (98.1%), followed by Newspapers (63.5%). However, in the VP student category the result was reversed, with Newspapers being
the most popular (56.4) choice followed by *Novels* in the second place (38.2%). The options *Poems, Plays,* and *Internet-forums* did not differ between the two student categories. Suggestions for the alternative *Other* were comic books, and exciting texts, moreover, some students having circled that option wrote “don’t know” where they could give suggestions.

In the final, open-ended question, students gave their own suggestions on the ways they think most suitable for working with English literature (in general) in school. All comments are represented in the table below, divided into: *productive skills and interaction,* and *receptive skills.* There are also a few comments concerning the material used and some more general answers that are presented as well. Here not that many students answered so the numbers in the table represent nominal numbers of students (in parenthesis).

Table 5. Students’ own ideas on how best to work with fictional literature in the English classroom, divided into program and skill practiced (number of students in parenthesis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill practiced/ comments:</th>
<th>Comments made by AP students:</th>
<th>Comments made by VP students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Productive skills and interaction</strong></td>
<td>-Discuss (9)</td>
<td>-Discuss (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Write about texts (6)</td>
<td>-Write about texts (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Write own stories inspired by texts (9)</td>
<td>-Write own texts (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Presentation of the text (4)</td>
<td>-Presentation of the text (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Working with a text physically such as make plays and movies (3)</td>
<td>-Make plays (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Receptive skills</strong></td>
<td>-Read more (6)</td>
<td>-Read more (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Analysis (9)</td>
<td>-Analysis (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Comprehension such as translation and answer questions (4)</td>
<td>-Grammar exercises in texts (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Watch movies made from literature that has been studied (1)</td>
<td>-Watch movies made from literature that has been studied (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments where material seems more important than the skill practiced</td>
<td>-Not too long texts (2)</td>
<td>-Up to date and interesting material (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Short texts/poems (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Not read too difficult texts (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Don’t know (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table shows that neither of the student categories mentioned the contents in fiction at all. The students in both programs gave similar suggestions on how to work with fictional literature; however, differences can be seen in the type of answers. AP students focused on *how* to work more than the VP students, who instead focused more on the *type of material* they found suitable.

5. Conclusion
The comparison of answers given by 52 academic program students and 55 vocational program students shows clearly that AP students are more interested in reading fiction in their spare time. Out of the total number of students that do read fiction in their spare time, the AP students also read a lot more in English (60.5%) than the VP students do (12.5%). They also rate that they enjoy it to a higher degree (46.2%) compared to the VP students (1.9%). It is, however, interesting that both categories rate their reading fiction in school as “sometimes”. One might have thought that the AP students would read more than the VP students in school, and that this would have made them more positive towards reading literature in their spare time as well. Instead, the result suggests that AP students have received positive attitudes towards reading fiction from other areas than school, and that these attitudes are part of the reason that they choose to attend academic programs. If students that like to read choose the academic program, this could also explain why the AP students are overall more positive towards fictional literature (and literature in general). Other elements that might affect the difference in opinion between AP and VP students could be, for instance, socio-economic and/or educational background (the VP students might come from lower class/non-academic families), though this is something that I did not ask for so I cannot say anything about that variable. However, one other variable was investigated, namely the differences between boys and girls. The result, however, was omitted as the difference was negligible and the gender proportion was unequal.

Regarding the students attitudes towards the frequency of reading in school, nearly half of the academic program students and nearly a quarter of the vocational program students would like to read more in school. This suggests that even though a majority of both groups chose the alternative *Good as it is* as their view on the frequency of reading in school, there are students in both programs who want to study more literature in school. It also means that even
though a large group of VP students do not read much in their spare time, they are more positive when it comes to reading fiction in school. This indicates that teachers should not simply consider the students’ interests in their spare time when deciding whether a task is valid in school or not (i.e. students might appreciate more literature in school even though they do not read a lot in their spare time). Instead the students need to be properly introduced to a task such as reading fiction and literature studies, and then they might enjoy doing it in school, even if they prefer other activities in their spare time.

The option *Seldom* was ranked the highest by both student categories when asked how often they work with fiction in school. Here it would have been interesting to find out if the teachers in these classes share this view. After all, it is not always that the students think of everything that goes on in the classroom, nor remember it when being asked to fill in a questionnaire. However, what the students do think of, and what they do remember, in my opinion, is what actually comes across in the classroom.

Even though fictional literature might not be the main focus in the A course of English in upper-secondary school, the curriculum clearly states that different types of texts should be treated to improve reading and understanding. Further, fiction and other types of literature should be seen as tools for acquiring cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries (Skolverket, 2000). It is not certain that students acquire this type of knowledge by doing literature studies “seldom”; this needs to be done on a regular basis.

Figure 6 shows clearly that VP students do not know whether or not studying literature helps them acquire a language, while the AP students believe it does, whether in school or at home, and they see the advantages more clearly. Since the VP students do not see these benefits, it is at school that this motivation needs to be created: “Teachers should stress how academic tasks are relevant to the world outside school” (Schunk et. al. 2008:200). Hence, if the advantages of literature studies were explained and experienced in vocational programs, perhaps these students too would become more motivated.

When it comes to the students’ thoughts on how to work best with literature, novels were preferred by a majority in both groups. When the students were asked to present their own suggestions, only a few new (not previously mentioned by me) suggestions were made. Methods such as presenting or answering questions, discussing, or writing about it, I think, can all be considered as “common” to literature teaching. Only a few brought up more unexpected suggestions, for instance, using the texts as inspiration for their own writing, in other words, creative writing. Other inventive suggestions included physical activity, such as making their own plays and movies based on texts.
Differences between the student categories can be seen in the type of suggestions made. The AP students commented on how to work with literature, whereas the VP students focused more on the type of texts, for instance, preferring up-to-date material and disliking lengthy and difficult texts. When beginning to read in a second language, the texts need to be rather controlled according to Nation (2009:18-19).

I think it is important to listen to students’ opinions on what to read, and evidently they would like to work more with fictional literature. They also propose working with other types of texts than fiction, for instance, newspapers. If students do not like what they read at all, they will not acquire lasting knowledge from the texts, nor will they continue to read if they experience too much difficulty. However, I believe it is important to make students discover literature so they can experience the benefits and pleasure of it. I also think that regularity is the best way to prevent literature from becoming something difficult and frightening. If students discover that reading fiction and doing literature studies are manageable and gratifying, they will more likely read in their spare time as well, and positive experiences in a school subject will also have good effects on their learning in general.

Suggestions for further study in this area of fictional literature (and literature in general) in the English classroom, would be to investigate the opinions of students and the teachers of those same students. Doing so would display if the opinions on what goes on in the classroom differs between students and their teachers. To make this possible, the participating groups of students would need to be smaller, and it would be a good idea to use both questionnaires and interviews as methods. Another suggestion would be to compare opinions of English fictional literature between academic program students at a municipal Swedish school, with students at a school (still in Sweden) where English is the standard language used in education.
Bibliography


Appendix 1 – Questionnaire (Enkät)

Denna enkät undersöker era uppfattningar om användandet av engelsk litteratur i engelskundervisningen.
Den utförs för att användas i min C-uppsats i engelska vid Karlstad Universitet och svaren på era enkäter är konfidentiella dvs. ingen förutom jag kommer veta vem som svarat vad och alla svar kommer vara anonyma i uppsatsen. Det är helt frivilligt att vara med och du kan när som helst bestämma dig för att inte delta. Jag hoppas att DU vill vara med i min undersökning och att du svarar så ärligt och noggrant du kan på frågorna.

Klass: □ Pojke □ Flicka □

Ringa in ditt svar!

1. Vad av nedanstående är litteratur enligt dig? (ringa in de alternativ du tycker stämmer, kan vara flera)
   ▪ Romaner
   ▪ Dikter
   ▪ Pjäser
   ▪ Kritisk essä (uppsats som granskar ett annat litterärt verk)
   ▪ Nyhetstidningar
   ▪ Chattar/bloggar på internet
   ▪ Annat: ________________

2. a) Hur ofta läser du skönlitteratur som inte är skoluppgift?
   ▪ Varje dag
   ▪ Ofta
   ▪ Sällan
   ▪ Aldrig

   b) Om du gör det, vilket språk är det på?
   Svenska □ Engelska □ Annat: ________________

3. Tycker du om att läsa skönlitteratur?
   □ Ja □ Ibland □ Vet inte □ Nej
4. Hur ofta använder ni skönlitteratur/dikter/pjäser i engelskan?
   - Varje lektion
   - Ofta
   - Sällan
   - Aldrig

5. Vad kan man lära sig inom ett lands språk och kultur genom att läsa? (ringa in de alternativ du tycker stämmer, kan vara flera)
   - Vet inte
   - Inget
   - Man blir bättre på att läsa på det språket
   - Man blir bättre på att skriva på det språket
   - Man får bättre ordkunskap i det språket
   - Man får bättre grammatikkunskap
   - Det blir lättare att förstå ett land/samhälles kultur
   - Annat: ____________________

6. Är läsning och analyserande av litteratur ett bra sätt att lära sig ett annat språk?
   - Ja
   - Ibland
   - Vet inte
   - Nej

7. Kan man lära sig något av nedanstående om ett lands verkliga kultur genom att analysera fiktiv (påhittad) litteratur ifrån det landet? (ringa in de alternativ du tycker stämmer, kan vara flera)
   - Vet inte
   - Inget
   - Om politiken i landet
   - Om religionen i landet
   - Historia
   - Traditioner
   - Annat: ____________________

8. Tror du man blir bättre på något av nedanstående inom litteratur genom att studera litteratur? (ringa in de alternativ du tycker stämmer, kan vara flera)
   - Bättre på att förstå handlingar i texter
   - Bättre på att bestämma genre i texter och media
   - Bättre på litteraturhistoria
   - Bättre på att förstå olika stilgrepp som ironi, överdrift, metaforer (ett uttryck byts ut mot ett annat som vanligen används i ett helt annat sammanhang)
9. Hur jobbar ni oftast med litteratur i engelskan? (ringa in de alternativ du tycker stämmer, kan vara flera)
   - Pratar om det som hände i texten
   - Skriver om det som hände i texten
   - Dramatiserar det som hände i texten
   - Vi använder litteraturen som inspiration för att skriva egna texter
   - Vi reflekterar över hur samhället (normer, värderingar, politik etc.) som författaren levde/lever i påverkar innehållet i litteraturen. Sedan skriver/pratar vi om det
   - Annat: ________________________________

10. Tror du att samhället påverkar vad författare skriver om?
    Ja   Ibländ   Vet inte   Nej

11. brukar ni fundera på hur samhällen och människor framställs i böcker i engelskan?
    Ja   Ibländ   Vet inte   Nej

12. Tror du att du får någon kunskap som påverkar ditt betyg i engelska positivt av att fundera på hur samhällen och människor framställs i engelska böcker?
    Ja   Ibländ   Vet inte   Nej

13. Hur mycket tycker du att ni använder litteratur i engelskan?
    - Alldeles för sällan
    - Lite för sällan
    - Precis lagom
    - Lite för ofta
    - Alldeles för ofta

14. Vilken typ av litteratur tycker du man ska använda i engelskan? (ringa in de alternativ du tycker stämmer, kan vara flera)
   - Skönlitterära böcker
   - Dikter
   - Pjäser
   - Kritisk essä (uppsats som granskar ett annat litterärt verk)
   - Nyhetstidningar
   - Chatter på internet
   - All text som är på engelska
   - Annat: ________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

16. Är det något du tycker att jag har glömt att fråga om när det gäller litteratur i engelskan så skriv gärna det här:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Tack för att DU hjälper mig i min studie!
//Rebecca Ragnarsson