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Reading That Matters

A Literature Review on Meaningful Reading Experiences in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This thesis is a literature review on literature reading in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, of mainly upper secondary schools. The underlying objective for this work is that meaningful reading experiences can have a positive impact on a developing young individual on his or her way into adulthood. The aim of this thesis is to explore what theories and methods are used when trying to create prerequisites for meaningful reading experiences, and how these experiences actually are realized. Qualitative methods are mainly used, except for a small section of the methodology of finding the sources, which is quantitative in nature. Since very little previous research has been done in the field, the six sources used in this review are internationally spread over five continents. They are mainly analyzed from a theoretical background of reader response and critical literacy perspectives. The main findings show that a number of theoretical approaches and methodologies can be useful in creating meaningful reading experiences. What may have proven most effective was addressing actual problems in the students' everyday lives through applied critical literacy.

Keywords: meaningful literature reading, EFL/ESL classroom, reader response theory, critical literacy

1.Introduction

Reading a book can change your life; any devout reader would vouch for that. Even if the reading was only meant for pleasure it is worth reflecting on that, according to celebrated author and reading promoter Chambers, “no fiction, none at all is without an ideology...and all stories are moral structures”, (2015). However, to really get into a story does take motivation especially if reading is part of a school assignment. Motivation is strongly connected to the experience of meaning, which comes from the interaction between what the student perceives relevant for his/her life, and the teaching content (Tornberg, 2009). It is said that a really strong connection to a novel can only begin with an emotional, an aesthetic response (Rosenblatt, as cited in Thyberg, 2012, p. 101). Discussing and re-enacting novels, poetry and drama may very well provide such a connection, creating a favorable realm of meaningful interaction. These life-related talks can then touch on experiences that really matter to the reader personally and to his/her social situation. Many theories, like the Reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995) and Critical literacy (Janks, 2010, 2013), have been presented over the years on the art of getting involved in a text, to be moved by it and to act upon it. Connecting a text to a person’s own experiences can also meet with the interpersonal goals of the Curriculum of the upper secondary school, as issued by the Swedish National Agency of Education (Skolverket). Personal and emotional book discussions may indeed facilitate “the understanding of other people and ability to empathize” (2011a).

A meaningful reading experience in general does of course require the mastery of both the decoding process, putting together the sounds of the letters into words, and the understanding of the language (Elbro, 2004). To really derive meaning from the text takes the ability to read both on, between and beyond the lines of the text, as is commonly taught in primary and secondary Swedish Schools today (Westlund, 2009). The current emphasis on reading comprehension, which can be noted in Swedish education research and practice today, may very well be a reaction to the alarming reports on the students’ levels of reading comprehension. Studies show that the ability to read longer texts in the vernacular has decreased dramatically, and that in 2009 one 15-year-old student out of five did not reach the basic levels of reading comprehension (Skolverket, 2011b). In the latest PISA (Programme for International Assessment) survey made by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), including 60 countries, this number has dropped even further for the Swedish participants (Skolverket, 2012a).

In the light of this great reading comprehension challenge, teachers of English face an even greater task: Providing meaningful reading experiences in another language than the vernacular. Being able to read and interpret different kinds of literature in English is, however, a substantial part of the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) syllabus. What seems to be lacking in the Swedish national steering documents is any form of substantial guidance on literature choice or on any methodology tips on teaching literature. Very little research, national or international, has been done at all in the area of reading literature in the EFL classroom, compared to literature reading in the vernacular. The limited work that has been done is however interesting to explore further. How is it done? What methods are used and how do teachers justify their choices? And how is this creation of meaning actually experienced by the students? These are interesting questions for a literature review such as this one, and are also a possible quest for future empirical studies.

The focus of this thesis originates from a personal interest in the actual process of creating meaning through reading. A really catching book can create so called flow experiences where time and space are forgotten for a little while and the reader is completely absorbed in the moment. These are the times when a reader is in direct and meaningful interaction with the content of the book and can wholeheartedly relate their personal lives to its contents. Even if learner outcomes cannot be exactly pinpointed from these experiences, they may very well create knowledge rather related to *Bildung*, the ancient concept of learning for life (Rejman, 2013). According to neo-humanist thought this concept can be interpreted as creating a “versatile, independent and harmonious human being with the ability to reflect over his/her own work and *Bildungs*-process” (Korsgaard & Løvilie 2011; Steinholt & Dobson 2011 as cited in Rejman 2013, p. 48, *Author’s translation*). Providing experiences where the students can be moved in their entire personality may facilitate such a development in a young individual.

One inspiration for writing this thesis comes from personal experiences from many years of interpreting religious text with others. Many of those texts have created life changing experiences and have served as means for interpreting lives of individuals and communities for thousands of years. A motivation for this study is to explore experiences like these, when individuals and groups become deeply engaged in textual worlds and find ethical implications for their own lives.

As an upper secondary teacher- in- the- making many opportunities will eventually present themselves where it will be possible to investigate different reading activities with the students as ways of developing all our lives, and as a prerequisite to be involved with others. The findings of this study will also serve as a theoretical background for further empirical studies in the field.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to explore and interpret recent research on different ways of creating interaction with literature that is perceived as meaningful by the students in the EFL upper secondary classroom. The research questions are as follows: What methods are used to create meaningful interaction between texts and students? What theoretical approaches are used to support these methods? What experiences of meaningful interaction with the text are expressed by the students?

2. Background and theoretical perspectives

In this section the curriculum and syllabi of English are discussed with a focus on Swedish upper secondary school (see Section 2.1) with some critical comments. Expanding on this further, the section 2.2 presents a discussion on the subject and language of English in a Swedish and international perspective. Section 2.3 is a presentation of the theoretical perspectives chosen for this thesis and two different theories are introduced.

2.1 Literature, culture and English in the Swedish upper secondary school curriculum and syllabi

Swedish upper secondary schools take on a great educational task fostering young adults to be responsible, well-functioning citizens of society. The Swedish National Agency for Education outlines the following goals in the national curriculum for upper secondary school:

The task of the school is to encourage all students to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom... [T]he school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathize.

In addition to this the national curriculum also provides a general encouragement to students to take part of literature and culture so he/she “can use non-fiction, fiction and other forms of

culture as a source of knowledge, insight and pleasure”, and also “obtain stimulation from cultural experiences and develop a feeling for aesthetic values” (Skolverket, 2011a).

Continuing with the course syllabus of English, the notion of communication as foundation of all human interaction is reflected throughout the text. Swedish upper secondary school teaches students aged 16-19 and offers three courses in the subject of English: English 5, 6 and 7. English 5 is mandatory for all national programs, and all academic programs also include English 6. English 7 is an elective course for students on academic programs. The syllabus contains an overall aim for all three courses on the three levels 5-7, and the syllabus of each course is divided into two parts: Core content and knowledge requirements. The core content is organized under three headlines: Content of communication, Reception and production and Interaction. The overall aim of all three level courses is that: “[s]tudents should be given the opportunity, through the use of language in functional and meaningful contexts, to develop all-round communicative skills” (Skolverket, 2011c). There is also an emphasis on the knowledge of English speaking cultures around the world, and by discussing and reflecting the students should also “develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world” (Skolverket, 2011c). This is of course a huge task to take on considering the diversity of cultures and contexts in other countries as well as in Sweden, and this diversity is of course also present in the classroom. This multiplicity of cultures does indeed add to the challenge of the English teacher. He or she has to choose literature presenting up-to date themes that appeal to the students, and then apply effective methods to enrich their reading experiences and thereby bridge the gap between the textual worlds and that of the students.

Explicit comments on the teaching of literature as well as elaborate comments on literature choice are missing from the commentaries from the National Agency of Education available on the subject (Börjesson, 2012), and are very brief in the syllabus for the English courses. In the core content section of English 5 the expected reception skills are painted with a broad brush as “literature and other fiction”. They are a little more developed in the English 6 course as “[c]ontemporary and older literature, poetry, drama and songs”. In the syllabus of English 7 only the brief “other fiction in various genres” is added to the above formulation (Skolverket 2011c).

Further exploring the goals of production and interaction the English 5 syllabus does include some incentives of interaction with the text. The students should be able to “instruct, narrate, summarize, explain, comment, assess, give reasons for their opinions, discuss and argue.” The English 6 syllabus has a similar wording as does English 7, adding only “investigate” and “negotiate” to the list of abilities required of the students. An explicit challenge to the students’ ability to deeply interact with the text is, however, only found in the English 7 syllabus, an elective not picked by many students. The content of communication here is defined as knowledge of: “[s]ocietal issues and working life; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; cultural expressions in modern times and historically, such as literary periods”. Adding further to this ambitious aim is the appeal to explore “ethical and existential issues”. Contributing to further textual explorations are the lines about developing “strategies for drawing conclusions about the spoken language and texts in terms of attitudes, perspectives, purposes and values, and to understand implied meaning”. To be able to identify and interpret “stylistics and rhetorical devices” are also connected to these aims, all part of the ambitious English 7 syllabus (Skolverket, 2011c).

In conclusion the Swedish National Curriculum and the syllabus of English have high aims regarding the fostering of young citizens. There are sections in the curriculum where the formulations indeed support cultural activities, such as reading as means to fulfill these goals. There are also high syllabus expectations on the students regarding their communicative, receptive and productive skills. Another focus in the syllabus is the interaction in English and the understanding of different English speaking cultures. Very little is, however, said on how literature choice can be made to further enhance the possibility of reaching these high goals. Nor does the syllabus provide any guidelines for teachers to discern what methodology or critical theories that could possibly promote the realization of these teaching goals.

2.2 Learning and teaching English in a Swedish and international context

Taking part of interactive reading experiences with others can be challenging, especially if the language used is not his or her vernacular. Many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and even ESL (English as a Second Language) students can share in the experience of alienation, and the feeling of becoming someone else speaking another language than one’s own (See for example

Franzén, 2001). Several definitions are available defining the concepts of EFL and ESL, but in this overview the terms are used according to the following elementary definition: “Second language acquisition takes place in the country where the language is spoken, whilst foreign language acquisition takes place outside of the language environment, typically in schools and universities “(Hammarberg, 2011, p. 28, *Author’s translation*). The challenges that come from expressing one’s inner thoughts and feelings in another language is a factor to be taken into account in evaluating all studies where reader response theory is applied in an EFL or an ESL context.

English does, however, seem to be increasingly used more as a second language especially by a young generation of Swedes. Recent research shows that the constant influx of extra-mural English (Sundqvist, 2009), mainly from online sources, seems to have contributed to the high levels of English reached by Swedish students. This proficiency is also demonstrated in the recent European Survey on Language Competences, ESLC, performed by the European Council (Skolverket, 2012 b). Among the 13 European countries participating in the study, Swedish students were actually ranked number one in reading comprehension in English, according to the scale of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR (Council of Europe, 2015). This is an interesting result in the light of the poor reading comprehension results in the vernacular reported by PISA (See section 1), and is a finding worth exploring in further research. Performing well does of course increase self-esteem, which perhaps also enhances motivation. If this is the case, the current expansion of English usage among young Swedes would speak in favor of the development of literature reading in the English classroom. Another factor that probably contributes to the positive results is the relatively high status of the English language, connected particularly to the American popular culture that has influenced Sweden for more than sixty years (Thyberg, 2012, p. 309). Sweden is a small country with a language with relatively few speakers, depending largely on international trade. This may postulate the continuous anglicizing of the Swedish language and culture visible everywhere in Swedish society today, especially in media communication. In conclusion it can be stated that English indeed is “prevalent in Swedish society like no other second language” (Josephsson 2004, as cited in Yoxsimer Paulsrud, 2014 p. 17).

The mostly undividedly positive attitude to the English language may also be connected to the fact that Sweden's part of colonial history is less evident to Swedes than to other nationalities, with a more pronounced identity as either colonizers or colonized (See for example Yang, 2010 as cited in Thyberg 2012, p. 73). This does perhaps make the English language less tainted by power implications than in other parts of the world. Even if it is not the focus of this thesis the post-colonial perspective is still a factor to be taken into account when comparing the results of EFL/ESL studies conducted in very diverse contexts of the world. Naming only one example, English is still considered highly controversial in Malaysia. Here one of the three major national languages, Malay, was reintroduced as a unifying language replacing the colonial English in the 1970s. English is now the medium of instruction only at the private universities, and according to Chris Frankland, of CfBT Education Trust in Malaysia, the use of it is still connected to a feeling of elitism (The Open University, 2011).

One conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that the subject of English in Sweden seems to be on a sliding scale moving away from an EFL definition. It may therefore be relevant to consider a movement towards English as a second language, or something similar to that (Hyltenstam 2004, p. 52). This consequently makes it relevant to include such different international studies in the research material of this thesis. All language usage has historical and present day economic power implications that cannot be ignored. Though not explored in depth in this thesis, the differences in language status and power are still factors to consider in making syntheses of different international studies, such as this one.

2.3 Theoretical perspectives - Reading literature that touches lives

Ever since critical theory challenged the essentialist ideas of liberal humanism (Barry 2009, p.33-34), the idea of what is meaningful in a text has to be something subjective, which ultimately can be defined only by the individual. In this thesis the concept of meaning is interpreted as the students' personal expressions in interaction with literature, involving emotions and values that go beyond the mere reading comprehension. Exploring the practice of literature reading in the EFL/ESL classroom takes comprehensive theoretical instruments that can elucidate the many aspects of creating meaning. Reader response theory in the strand represented by Rosenblatt (1978, 1995) is a genuinely interdisciplinary theory, connecting to psychology, philosophy, pedagogy and literature critique. This corresponds well to the aim of this thesis, exploring how

the complex process of meaning is negotiated in the classroom context, involving both aesthetic and ethical aspects. In addition, it encompasses a perspective of social action, which may be perceived as a natural consequence of moving reading experiences that connect to ethical implications.

Critical literacy, on the other hand, has proven to be an applicable instrument to even further delve into these ethical practices and making real life action of the issues evoked by literature. In this thesis the theoretical approaches are positioned in a continuum from the more individualized and personal responses over the interpersonal relationships, both represented by reader response theorists, and then moving further into critical response and the movement towards the societal and political arenas, opting for tangible change. The wide range of theoretical approaches corresponds to the aim in this overview and is justified by the equally wide range of personal and societal levels on which meaning can be derived.

2.3.1 Reader response

Finding the prerequisites of meaningful interaction between the text and the reader requires appropriate theoretical tools. The reader response theory responds well to this need as it “explicitates interpretation as meaning constructed in interaction” (Thyberg, 2012, p. 33). Brooks and Browne (2012) propose three different positions of reader response theory, all considering the individual reader’s very active role in the reading process (for an overview, see table 2 below). The first stance in this continuum emphasizes the literary devices as useful keys in going into deeper interaction with the text. This foregrounds the craftsmanship of the author and the keys he/she provides through literary conventions (see for example Rabinowitz, 1987). At the other end of the continuum of reader response theories presented over the years, another group of theorists position themselves emphasizing the reader’s interpretation over the actual text. One example of this is Bleich’ early work (1976), stressing the importance of the reader’s own context such as gender, family situation or income. To him these prerequisites are completely decisive for the subjective interpretation of the reader (Bleich, 1976). According to the analysis of Brooks and Browne (2012) American theorist Rosenblatt takes a middle position in this continuum, putting forth the constant negotiation between reader and text to create meaning (Rosenblatt, 1982). This so called transactional view of the reading process has survived several waves of literature

critique over the years, and remains useful in literature analysis in the didactical context as a “coherent defense of the essential reasons for teaching literature in the first place” (Booth, 1995, p. *xiii*).

Table 2. Different stances in the continuum of reader response theory according to Brooks and Browne (2012).

First position	Middle ground	Second position
Foregrounding literary devices as keys to deeper interaction with the text.	The constant negotiation between reader and text, the transactional view.	Stressing the importance of the reader’s own context.
Rabinowitz, 1987: <i>Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation.</i>	Rosenblatt, 1982: <i>The Reader, the Text and the Poem: the Transactional Theory of the Literary Work.</i>	Bleich (1976): <i>Pedagogical Directions in Subjective Criticism.</i>

The challenge of making literature choices for students is also addressed by Rosenblatt. She reasons that the teacher has to opt for the work that “the individual can most fully enter into, given what you know of that individual’s past experience” (as cited in Erixon & Malmgren, 2001, p. 63). According to Booth, Rosenblatt believes that “all serious responses are worth exploration” (1995 p. *x*) and she also reacts against the dichotomy that has become the experience of many students of literature in the English classrooms. She describes this experience of separation as taking place on two separate planes, where on the one level the students learn and discuss literature as a classroom activity, and on the other read and react personally to what they read (Rosenblatt 1995, p. 56). Consequently the two experiences never actually meet, and literature learning becomes reduced to something of a “spectator sport” (p. 57). Rosenblatt argues instead for an experience of “living through” the content of literature and in this way enlarging the students’ knowledge of the world (p. 38). Rosenblatt also declares that the social/ethical and aesthetic values of literature are inseparable, and that the one cannot be considered without the other (p. 23). She writes: “When the student has been moved by a work of literature, he will be led to ponder on questions of right or wrong, of admirable or antisocial qualities, of justifiable or unjustifiable actions” (p. 16). The simple but yet great pedagogical task of the language teacher is then, together with the rest of the teaching staff, to provide the student with “the proper equipment for making sound social and ethical judgment” (p. 21). In conclusion, when analyzing students’ interactions with each other on the subject of literature, reader response theory according to Rosenblatt provides a comprehensive instrument for both personal and inter-personal levels.

2.3.2 Critical literacy

Considering that response theory does take on an ethical dimension, the theory of critical literacy does take it one step further. Critical literacy is actually a spin-out from critical theory, and explores the educational implications of this thinking. It is defined by Luke (2004) as the use of different kinds of literature and other means of communication “to analyze, critique and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke, 2004, p. 5). The concept of literacy in this theoretical approach is of course a much wider notion than simply reading and writing, it is seen rather as an instrument for social justice. Recent critical theory approaches does focus on textual devices, such as grammar, but also adds the shaping of sociopolitical worlds to the quest (Luke, 2012). Critical literacy theorist Janks declares that the aim for the students should not be just to be able to read the word, but the world as well (Janks, 2013, p. 227). This means for example making use of the students’ ethnic backgrounds and appreciating them as the true assets they are. Drawing from Marxist theory, phenomenological philosophies and with the inspiration from social educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, Janks also makes the connection to politics, embolding the students to question existing power relations (p. 227) and the overall structures of society. According to Freire, encouraging the students to re-name their own realities increases the possibilities for change (1972, p. 61). One of Janks’ examples of recent critical theory in practice is a project in poverty stricken communities in South Africa, where the students themselves are empowered to gain of control over what they read and write, and to whom and in what way they choose to present it (p. 237). Critical literacy can thus be defined as simply giving a new focus to the student as protagonist of his/her own life. This theoretical stance has also received a warm welcome by the Swedish National Agency of Education, and has led to innovative practices in several pre-schools and primary schools in Sweden (see for example Bergöö & Jönsson, 2012 and Skolverket, 2014b). To summarize, critical literacy provides a theory that takes the individual experiences and responses to the texts from the interpersonal level into societal involvement, engaging the students’ own life experiences to the fullest.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this thesis is presented in the following sections: Design (3.1), Selection criteria and limitations (3.2), Analysis (3.3) and Ethical aspects (3.4).

3.1 Design

The choice of method for this thesis is the systematic literature review which simply is “an account of what has been published on a topic by accredited scholars and researchers” (Taylor, 2015). It does not claim to be a complete overview of the research in the particular field, but is rather limited in scope by the guidelines for the degree thesis at Dalarna University. The methodology section of this overview is followed by a result section (Section 4) which first presents the results of the search (4.1) and then presents the synthesis of the material of the research (4.2).

3.2 Selection criteria and limitations

The primary formal selection criteria used for this literature overview were finding peer-reviewed sources in full text that were recently published (between the years 2005 to 2015). The focus has been on empirical research rather than literature reviews or textbooks. The student perspective was also made priority rather than instruction or teacher training. Focusing on search words and increasing the number of hits, the abbreviations *EFL* and *ESL* have proven more useful than just *English (language)*, since these tend to include hits from all areas of research written in English. The term *ELT* for English Language Teaching also provided some hits in the search. Excluding *children* and *adults* has been one way of limiting the search when it comes to age groups. The initial area of interest of this study was poetry reading, but since no sources were found from the *ESL/EFL* perspectives, the field had to be broadened into *literature*, also using the search words *narrative* and *reading*. Also, since the primary focus was on *reading* and *discussing* rather than *writing* and *listening*, this eliminated many articles using critical science to assess these abilities. To find the connection to the theoretical aspects of the search several different theory search words were used, such as *reader response*, *foregrounding*, *aesthetic reading* and *critical literacy*.

The library search engine *Summon* of Dalarna University has been used for a wider search, as well as direct searches on several online scholarly journals. Since very little research is done in the field of meaningful literature reading in the *EFL/ESL* classroom, the sources used for this survey are widely internationally distributed, and retrieved mostly from the database *ERIC* (The Education Resources Information Center), which has proven most resourceful in this search.

Several of the theory sources used in the studies were also found in the original using the search motor *Google Scholar*. For secondary sources the webpage of the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) has provided curriculum and syllabus material, as well as a lot of other recent research material.

When it comes to limitations many interesting surveys on reader response had to be excluded since they were all set in English as a first language context. Given the fact that English enjoys an especially strong, if yet not defined, status in the Swedish society as something different than other “modern languages”, the inclusion of ESL studies can also be justified. Comparing material from a vast international field, like the one presented in this overview, has its limitations. A deeper analysis of each cultural teaching context would have been interesting, but had to be eliminated for scope reasons. Further limitations in the search were the exclusion of research that focuses primarily on new technology used in for example distance study programs, which are available in great number in current research. Students aged 15 – 19 (20) are taught in the Swedish upper secondary school. In other international school systems 19-year-olds can also be found in the freshman year of University, which justifies the inclusion of such a study in this overview. In addition to this, the teacher degree for Swedish upper secondary schools also qualifies for teaching in secondary schools. Therefore an article set in such a context also has its place in this study. One of the studies included in the survey does have a teacher’s perspective to some extent (Msila 2011), but since it also presents students’ experiences it does have a place in the study as well. In sum, the width of this material contributes to the comprehensive picture of the student responses. Some specific problems that have surfaced in the search have been finding material that focuses on the reader’s experiences rather than *reading comprehension* or assessment, which are fields where extensive research has been done. Finding out whether the research has a student or teacher perspective is another problem, which sometimes takes time to assess.

In conclusion, hundreds of articles were eliminated due to the fact that they focused on a first language context, or that they were conducted on other educational levels, or were focusing on other abilities or assessment, or finally, that they were focusing on other aspects of teaching or theory. The selection of titles to read was made from the above mentioned criteria, but often

numerous summaries had to be read before finally arriving at a useful article. This complex process explains the variety of search word combinations and search engines used (see Section 4.1 Results of the search).

3.3 Analysis

Using qualitative methods the structure of this thesis is as follows: first an analysis of the search followed by an analysis of the sources on the basis of the three research questions above (see Aim 1.1). Six sources representing Africa, North America, Asia and Europe have been used in the thesis and the results have been organized thematically using the principle of theoretical approaches (4.2.2), methodological approaches (4.2.3) and the students' experiences of meaningful interaction with literature (4.2.4).

3.4. Ethical aspects

This thesis is a literature review and follows the academic guidelines of such a piece of work. All sources used in this work have been peer-reviewed and are used in such a manner that the informants' confidentiality is respected. The results of the research used in this review are interpreted and presented in such a responsible ethical manner that they will not strain the original intention. The ethical aspects of each of the individual works used are, however, not analyzed in detail in this thesis.

4. Results of the analyses

The result section is organized according to the following outline: The results of the search (4.1) are presented first, followed by the synthesis of the articles (4.2.) This synthesis is presented according to the three research questions. The different theoretical approaches of the studies are presented first with an introduction (4.2.1), followed by three subsections (4.2.1.1- 4.2.1.3). Secondly the methodological approaches are presented with an introduction (4.2.2), followed by three subsections (4.2.2.1 – 4.2.2.3), and finally the realization of meaningful reading is presented in Section 4.2.3.

4.1 Results of the search

Finding research on literature reading in the EFL/ESL classroom has proven most difficult. This is very interesting since literature reading seems to be a natural part of the syllabi of English in all international studies included in this review. Finding Swedish research in the field, apart from textbooks, has been even more difficult since extremely little research has been done in the field. This is a result in itself which points to a great need of further research. The primary Swedish source for this thesis, Thyberg, 2012, was found, surprisingly enough, through the Swedish website *Skolporten* which is a corporately owned website where recent research is presented. This was the only Swedish source found in the search. The main sources below were found using and combining the following search words: *narrative*, *language*, *EFL/ ELT/ ESL (classroom)*, *critical literacy* and *reader response* (see Table 1, below). For an extensive discussion of the search words used see section 3.2.

Table 1: Selected search paths for main sources

Search engine/ Online scholarly journal	Search words used	Number of hits	Titles read	Summaries read	Title of article used
ERIC	<i>ESL AND critical literacy</i>	8	8	2	“Reconceptualizing Critical Literacy Teaching in ESL Classrooms” by Lau (2012).
ERIC	<i>literature AND ELT</i>	27	27	3	“Literature Circles in ELT” by Shelton-Strong (2012).
Summon	<i>reader response AND ESL classroom</i>	2396	106	11	“Transactional Reader Response and Foregrounding Theories in ESL Classroom” by Kadir et al. (2012).
<i>Language and Education</i>	<i>narrative AND language</i>	287	60	2	“Autobiographical narrative in a language classroom: a case study in a South African school” by Msila (2011).
<i>The Language Teaching Research</i>	<i>reader response</i>	101	51	3	“The reading response journal: An alternative way to engage low-achieving EFL students” by Lee (2012).
Skolporten	<i>literature AND EFL</i>	2	2	1	“Ambiguity and Estrangement: Peer-Led Deliberative Dialogues on Literature in the EFL Classroom” by Thyberg (2012).

4.2 Results - three different approaches to literature reading and interpretation

The six studies of this thesis represent many different contexts and aspects of literature reading in the EFL/ESL classroom. The authors apply several different theories as background to the research they have performed. There are also vast differences in methods used and great variation of what outcomes are actually presented in terms of meaningful reading experiences for the students. These three different perspectives, corresponding to the three research questions of this review, are presented in the synthesis below.

4.2.1 How different theories can support the work of creating meaningful discussions on literature - Introduction

As this thesis will show, many different theories can be applied on deriving meaning from literature in the EFL/ESL classroom. This could be interpreted as consistent with Rosenblatt's appeal to students to "live through the text" (Rosenblatt 1995, p. 35), since it would require the complete human being taking part in the interaction with the literature. Taking into account that all the perspectives tend to interlock, three different takes on theory can be discerned from the material of this thesis: The psychological and cognitive perspective, the reader response perspective focusing on both text and context and the critical literacy approach which foregrounds ethical and social contexts.

4.2.1.1 Theory: The psychological and cognitive perspectives

Research focusing primarily on the mental and psychological reactions within the students, can be based on psychologist ideas such as Bruner's (1990). He contributes with ideas on the constant and creative creation of meaning within the human being and is used by Msila (2012) in his research on the importance of the autobiographical narration in the English classroom. Drawing on the structuralist ideas of narratology stressing the importance of the life organizing principles present in any story (see for example Barry 2009), Msila aims to make a connection between the students' identification with their teacher's life story and their empowerment in their present social situation (Msila, 2011, p. 236). Arguing for story telling as means of life interpretation, the teacher of the survey focuses on the students rather than on the text, using his own positive experiences of teachers sharing their life stories. He assumes this approach will benefit his own students as well. The research is done in a deprived urban area of post-apartheid South Africa

with the researcher monitoring the work of an English teacher, teaching two large classes with 36 and 40 students respectively. Given the context it is interesting to note that nothing is mentioned of post colonial theory, which may have proven fruitful connecting to the autobiographical approach. Post-colonial theory deals with themes such as the claims of universalism in literature, cultural diversity and how the states of plurality and perceived ‘Otherness’ can be “seen as sources of... potential change” (Barry, 2009, p. 192). All of the above seem to be in line with the teacher’s ideas of foregrounding language and narration. The question why the narrative approach means so much to the teacher is, however, never really explored in this research work. This could point to the difficulty of formulating objective research questions, if being very involved in the context as a researcher. There may be, however, a question of the interpretative prerogative here and the suggestion to focus on post colonial theory may in itself be an example of the colonizer’s perspective. It may very well be that the strong oral, narrative tradition is actually a more genuine and appropriate response to literature in this context than any other.

Along the lines of cognitive and psychological approaches to literature reading, the explicit development of the students’ thinking was according to the researcher/teacher Lee an astounding secondary finding in his research (2012). 40 Taiwanese English students in their freshman year of college were included in the study aiming to explore their possible language improvement using an e-journal. Using reader response theory as the theoretical background Lee does, however, seem to land in composition theorist Odell’s contribution to the different stages of thinking (Odell, 1999). These stages proved to be an important instrument to explore the findings further. Lee was also surprised to find the students drawing on their prior reading experiences of national folk literature and expressing themselves through poetry inspired by their own literary tradition (2012, p. 126). This may point to a certain obliviousness of the contextual importance of EFL language learning. Greater outcomes would probably be generated from the reading experiences if the students were encouraged to make connections to their own cultural worlds. This is also one of Lee’s own conclusions in this study (p. 126).

4.2.1.2 Theory: The reader response perspective

The point of personal expressions takes us further into the reader response theories, which seem to have been most applicable in exploring reading experiences. Predominantly used by Kadir,

Maasum and Vengadasamy (2012), Lee (2012) and in part also by Thyberg (2012) different reader response theories have proven to be useful instruments, in particular the middle ground taken by Rosenblatt (see Section 2.1.2). Considering the amplitude of the reader response theories and possible areas of application according to Rosenblatt, surprisingly few ideas were used by the researchers in performing the actual studies. The important question of meaningful interaction posed in the background presentations of the surveys later seem to be drowning in measurable assessment tasks, instead of emotionally and aesthetically engaging activities. This is most certainly the case in the quantitative research of Kadir et al. (2012). The study took place in a Malaysian upper secondary school at the end of the semester focusing on the foregrounding of literal devices. 24 16-year-old ESL students were included in the study. The students' task in the study was to identify these foregrounded elements as possible instruments of creating meaning and identification with the protagonist in a short story. The connection between the foregrounding and the creation of meaning was however omitted in the instructions, which probably also affected the outcome, according to the research team (Kadir et al., p. 1690). In addition to this it may be pointed out that the students were only given small parts of a story, denying them the fullness of the reading experience. Drawing on Rosenblatt, research made like this where no immediate emotional or aesthetic aspects were considered in the students' task, must at least be considered an oversight of the educational possibilities offered in the exercise.

4.2.1.3 Theory: The critical literacy perspective

As a third theoretical strand critical theories contributes with ideas on how literature reading is transformed into personal and societal action. Postcolonial theory is used in Thyberg's research (2012) to interpret the peer-led group discussions on novels with postcolonial ethical themes from China and America (historical novels), a sci-fi thriller and a migration story placed in the UK and Nigeria¹. In addition to this Marxist critic Bakhtin contributes to the theoretical background of her work with his ideas of answerability to whatever is experienced through art (Bakhtin, 1990). Using the concept of estrangement Thyberg's thesis is that the "strangeness" of the literary worlds encountering the students' own realities would evoke genuine discussions on values. The

¹ Harrison, Kathryn (2000). *The Binding Chair*. London: Fourth Estate.
 Tademey, Lalita (2001). *Cane River*. London: Headline.
 Carr, Caleb (2000). *Killing Time*. New York: Warner Books.
 Emecheta, Buchi (1974, 1994). Oxford: Heinemann.

students in her study do express that the project has taught them to “appreciate one’s own life more” (Thyberg 2012, p. 318) and to develop a “non-judgmental attitude to other people” (p. 317). What is difficult to assess, however, is whether the distance between the textual worlds and the world perceived by these homogenous and well-adapted Swedish teenagers (Thyberg, 2012, p. 135), was too wide to actually evoke a response that could lead to social change. Another critical comment is that Sweden has been a multi-cultural country due to migration for many years, and surely there would have been possible to connect to experiences of estrangement much closer to home. Literature choice seems to play a great role in this creation of involvement for possible change. By choosing literature with themes that are distant to the students’ everyday lives, and giving little guidance on how to approach these themes, there may be a risk of creating a too large a gap between the novel and the student which cannot be abridged without further assistance from the teacher. This line of reasoning may also be confirmed by reader response theorist Rosenblatt (as cited in Erixon & Malmgren, 2001, p. 63), and may then actually work in the opposite direction than was intended by Thyberg.

The aim to create incentives for change may be made even more explicit using critical theory, as is demonstrated by Lau (2012). The study was made on a group of newly arrived Chinese students in grades 7 and 8 in a Canadian city. By identifying an actual problem as a starting point, literature was used as ways of creating empowerment for social change. Among other things critical literacy emphasizes the importance of the student’s own social and ethnic identity and the empowerment of deprived groups and individuals. By re-interpreting the Cinderella story, challenging the stereotypes and re-writing it using folklore themes the students also read and wrote themselves into the new context (Lau 2012, p. 328). Yet it is surprising to find that the students are hardly given a voice at all in the presentation of the Canadian material. On the contrary the outcome is primarily commented on by the researchers and other teachers. This would suggest that the point of challenging the existing power structures in society still needs to be made, which is what the theory of critical literacy is aiming for (Janks, 2013, p. 227). This research may have been even more interesting if it included the students’ writing something back to the actual presentation, from their point of view.

4.2.2 Methods for creating a beneficial climate for meaningful literature interaction - Introduction

In addition to theory it is also interesting to find out how the use of different teaching methods can have an impact on the degree of meaning negotiated among students discussing literature. One methodological approach is foregrounding certain elements such as the text itself (Kadir et al., 2012), or the teacher and his own life story (Msila, 2011). Another methodology is to create a safe environment where students feel free to express themselves. This is realized by teacher and researcher Lee (2012) using online literature discussion forums and by Thyberg (2012) and occasionally by Msila (2011) and Shelton-Strong (2012), all using peer- led group discussions where the absence of the teacher may promote freer expression of thought. A third methodological take is to focus on an actual problem occurring in the students' every day lives. This is done by Lau (2012) in the Canadian context with newly arrived teenaged Chinese students.

4.2.2.1 Method: Foregrounding literary or contextual elements

To foreground certain textual elements to convey greater depths in meaning is one of the reader response strands (see 2.1.1). Research group Kadir et al. used this theory to assess if the levels of proficiency determined if foregrounding elements (such as personification and metaphors) were detected in the text. They also questioned the students in detail on levels of identification with the story and the protagonist. Even if the researchers found that the high proficiency students were able to identify the foregrounding elements, they were still more emotionally evoked by the protagonist and events of the story in itself than by the foregrounded elements they found (Kadir et al., 2012, p. 1690). This result could argue against a focus on technical use of literary devices over an immediate emotional and aesthetic response to the story. The results may also confirm Rosenblatt's critique on the separated reading experiences (see 2.1.1). She cautions against the kind of reading which is only for satisfying the teacher's demands, favoring the reading for pleasure which creates true interaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 56). The study of Kadir et al. may point to the fact that teaching could be so much more rewarding for both students and teachers if the worlds of the texts and of the students should come together.

A very different way of foregrounding certain elements for deeper reader experiences is expressed in Msila's research (2011). Here the teacher in himself becomes the focal point. By using his own life story the teacher in Msila's study helps the students approach the subject of English in a less threatening context. An important part of this autobiographical approach is the use of other national languages from time to time in the classroom. This code-shifting can aid the student to relax and find ways to relate to the strangeness of the contexts presented in the English classics. The strains of being continuously taught in a foreign colonial language is expressed by one of the students as the experience of wearing two different pairs of shoes and being forced to constantly change them (Msila, 2011, p. 238). Considering the post-apartheid context with higher education (and the subject of English) still connected to racial tension, it seems the teachers need to break down barriers of distrust to be able to teach (See for example Plüddeman, 2015). Msila concludes that by using his own life story as foreground the teacher enables the students to enter into the new textual worlds.

4.2.2.2 Method: Creating a safe and open environment for discussion

Another method used for meaningful reading of English literature is creating an open and "safe" environment for discussions. Two very different methods emerge from the material. They are the online reader response journal (Lee, 2012) and the forming of autonomous peer-led book discussion groups introduced by Thyberg (2012), which are also used by Shelton-Strong's (2012) Literature Circles and to some extent by Msila (2011). Lee (2012) taught English to 40 freshman year students at a Taiwanese university. He complemented his classroom seminars in English with online posting responding to the reading of English literature, and calls this "creating a low-risk environment" (Lee, 2012, p. 112). By eliminating shyness and self-consciousness Lee's students could express themselves freer, in a "first draft chat" like way (p. 115). Given the fact that these students were low achievers the method proved successful and also lead to more aesthetic responses, like poetry, than what the teacher/researcher had expected (p. 126). In his literature circle (LC)-project in Vietnam Shelton-Strong (2012) demonstrates how several of the students' language abilities improved from LC. By introducing an ambitious role distribution program meaningful book discussions were carried out by using small groups. The two main groups of students in this study, aged 13-15 and 15-17, were taught in a teaching context called the British Council, a language and culture center which was only declared independent from the

British embassy in 2000 (www.britishcouncil.vn). The fact that the teaching context may have post-colonial implications is however not mentioned in Shelton-Strong's research article, which is more of a methodological presentation and leaves out all contextual comments. Yet one of the students comments that she "like[s] to compare the culture between my country and the position in the story" (Shelton-Strong, 2012, p. 219). This research may have gained from drawing on other theories besides earlier research on LC. Given the dramatic and violent history of Vietnam, critical response theory and practice could very well have supplemented the ambitious role distribution program of the LC presented by Shelton-Strong in this study.

Thyberg's (2012) four groups of literature readers were supplied with the novels chosen from quite a long list, a handout for organizing group discussions and a mini-disk recorder. Still they managed for the most part, according to Thyberg, to create by themselves a "movement between distance/critical analysis...and immediacy/emotional response" in their discussions. She reports that these student led discussions evoked feelings of "identification, empathy [and] respect" (Thyberg, 2012, p. 283). Given the difficult post-colonial themes of the novels, most groups seemed to successfully engage in the conversations. Thyberg also comments on the importance of her absence from the groups. As soon as she was present the participants turned to her for her opinion, which helped her make a point of staying away not to disturb the process (Thyberg 2012, p. 142). These findings also point to two conflicting goals of the teacher. On the one hand he or she has to assess all elements of the course syllabus and on the other hand he or she needs to offer the students the space they need to openly share with each other in their responses to the literature to find meaning.

4.2.2.3 Method: Focusing on a contextual problem

It is interesting to note that in this material two opposing methods emerge to engage students in meaningful interaction with texts. Instead of creating some kind of safe haven for discussions like the researchers Lee (2012), Thyberg (2012) or Shelton-Strong (2012), the researcher Lau (2012) sets out to actually foreground the destabilization factors. The newly arrived Chinese teenaged students had problems fitting in at their new Canadian school. Focusing on an actual contextual problem like bullying the action research team of teachers actually changed their lesson plans to address the issue. If researcher Thyberg (2012) tries to focus on post-colonial awareness to raise

consciousness of inequality in society, Lau and his team actually act on what is present in the students' lives. Lau's research is an example of how critical literacy can be performed demonstrating how this line of critical thinking is genuinely interconnected to action. Reading literature on the problem at hand, writing about the problems and then discussing and writing back to address the problems in new ways empowered the students, says Lau, and gave them "a sense of their own voice" (Lau, 2012, p. 329). The students themselves were also given the opportunity to share their work with the rest of the teaching staff and create posters for the whole school to see. This way they became empowered to address their own situation. The critical literacy method was also transmitted over to the students' history class where a contextual method was used on the theme of famous Canadians. This may also have created renewed relevance to the material for these newly arrived students.

4.2.3 How is the meaningful interaction actually realized - students' experiences

The third research question of this thesis actually summarizes the main research objective: Do these book talks "work"? Do the discussions about English literature create meaningful experiences for the participants that can develop not only the students' abilities in English communication, but also make a difference in their personal lives and in society? First it has to be pointed out that it is very difficult to define the concept of "meaningful", since it is a very subjective experience. Not all research included in this review chose to focus on the actual student experience of literature reading. All the same quite a few findings can be assessed from the material presented above. Only in Shelton-Strong's (2012) and Thyberg's research (2012) the students' voices are heard first hand on their own reading experiences. These findings show that the students do connect their reading experiences to their own lives. It is however noticeable in both Lau's critical literacy project and (2012) and in Lee's online response journals (2012) that when the students are given the opportunity of expressing themselves through writing, this can actually change their life situations. In these two works it is evident that the students also are drawing from their own culture in responding to the texts. Since Msila's research report (2011) in itself is presented in a style inspired by the autobiographical method, the teacher's voice speaks louder than the students'. The improved results of the students do however point to the autobiographical approach as a successful model of literature teaching, creating a safer learning environment that may benefit true reader responses. Kadir et al. (2012) may also find from the

responses in their study that there is a power in the story itself and its characters, and that this can create interesting student responses. This may perhaps present more interesting results than the assessing of identification of literary devices, which was the original focus.

5. Conclusion

The lack of research in the field of meaningful literature reading in the EFL/ESL classroom is a most interesting finding in this review. One can only speculate why so little research is done in the field and wonder if this implies that choosing literature in English and teaching it to create meaning, comes so natural for English teachers that it needs no further instruction. A consequence of the lack of research is that many important decisions concerning English literature teaching are left to the individual teacher. The research found for this thesis does, however, point to the fact that there are indeed experiences in the field that could be made available and useful to other teachers. Further research in the field is therefore warmly welcomed. The limited amount of research available for this thesis had to be retrieved from all over the world. The many cultural aspects that need to be considered complicate the interpreting process, but the wide distribution of sources may also be considered an asset. Globalization and migration today constantly affect the composition of teaching groups everywhere, and the international outlook may also contribute to a deeper teacher understanding of the students and their experiences dealing with literature. If inter-cultural understanding can be facilitated through meaningful literature reading, it may even work as means for peaceful and enriched multi-cultural social interaction.

In concluding the results of this essay it can be noted that many different methods and theories can be used to create a discussion friendly climate, where meaning can be derived from reading experiences. This diversity corresponds well with the interdisciplinary nature of the question of meaning. From a practitioner's point of view all these theoretical approaches and methodological instruments could in fact contribute to a more dynamic literature teaching in English as a foreign language. Another possible lesson learned from the studies included in this survey is the students' willingness to respond emotionally and aesthetically on different levels to literature, also to value issues, if only given the opportunity. And if a reading experience is engaging, it does not just facilitate all the learning goals of production and interaction stated in the syllabi of English, but

may also be a part of the shaping process described in the National Curriculum, molding responsible adults ready to deal with ethical issues in society. A question for Swedish English teachers that may arise from this material, and could be an incentive for further research, is if the syllabus requirements are more important than the curriculum? Might there not be a risk of focusing on the assessing of abilities rather than on the process of creating meaning, and consequently missing out on the aesthetic responses and the values they represent?

To create meaning that may actually change the lives of the students, actual involvement seems to be key. By drawing from a present conflict in the everyday lives of the students and choosing literature accordingly, a new dimension can be created in literature work. By writing about, discussing and writing back to the problems the students can figure out together ways of social action that can improve their situation, as well as others. This critical literacy approach creates meaning that quite overshadows any of the other theories and methods included in this survey. It is fair to assume that in a classroom where this kind of meaning is negotiated other syllabus' requirements "come with the bargain", so to speak.

A final word about the in-school context: There is no escaping the classroom and the prerequisites that come with this physical milieu. It will always affect the results of any study and make it difficult to reach the most inner values and attitudes of the students. The result of this study does, however, point to the many benefits making literature reading something more than just exercises to improve different language skills in the EFL classroom. There are many ways to go about creating contexts for reading experiences that matters.

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