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Teaching literature in lower secondary classrooms

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1. Abstract

The inclusion of literature in lower secondary school has several advantages, including improvement of language proficiency, exposure to different cultures, and enhancement of literary knowledge. The Swedish lower secondary school curriculum endorses the use of literature in language classes. This study aims to examine the general teaching approach to using literature, their teaching ideals, and the factors that influence their teaching approaches. The studies showed that incorporating literature in the classroom is important and that it will provide numerous benefits for the students. The results indicate also that there are various approaches available for teachers to integrate literature into their teaching.

**Key terms:** Literature, classroom, language proficiency, teaching methods.
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2. Introduction

Reading literature in lower secondary school remains at the heart not only of the language arts but of the cultural debate. Across the world, educational systems invest heavily in the expectation that reading literature in the classroom may teach students a number of social, human, and cultural values. Active engagement in reading literature has long been considered a form of vicarious experience, and it is linked with the ability to understand the perspectives of others. The imaginative powers of literature may even expand our capacity for empathy and social judgment (Gabrielsen, 2019). The literary experience encompasses openness and inquiry, where we constantly seek out and explore potential outcomes for the present and future. This type of thinking is distinct from other forms of thinking and has the potential to enhance explorative and creative thinking. Reading literature encompasses cognitive dimensions that are vital aspects of intellectual growth. Engaging with fiction not only develops literary text proficiency but also improves a more general text proficiency, allowing students to acquire knowledge and express themselves in various subjects and situations.

Furthermore, Gabrielsen says that the level of access to literary texts at home varies greatly among children. Therefore, interactions between students and literary texts led by skilled teachers have become increasingly crucial. If literary proficiency is something that schools should foster as is often the expectation in many countries, it is vital that teachers play a role in socializing students to the ways of reading literature and the literary discourse that we use to make sense of what we read.

Additionally, in teaching literature in classrooms, Hossain (2020) states that literature often centers around the question of whether teachers should present a neutral and impartial perspective when discussing political and philosophical ideologies in the classroom, or if they should actively impart their own political and philosophical views onto their students. Hossain also argues that teachers should minimize or not include their ideologies while teaching because, throughout the student's education, they should not be taught political agendas. However, critics contend that it may be difficult for teachers to steer clear of affecting their students with their personal beliefs. This is because the materials they choose, their teaching techniques, and the manner in which they conduct their classes are all indicative of their ideologies, and can shape the perspectives of their students. Hossain states that teachers should not use their positions as a platform to promote a specific ideology or act as political activists. Instead, they have a moral obligation to uphold and impart the universal
values of humanity to their students. These values include the importance of liberal democracy, liberty, and social justice, as they are fundamental to our society and civilization. Great teachers do not impose their beliefs on their students but rather serve as facilitators, creating a learning environment where students can objectively explore the world. In literature classrooms, some teachers may impose their ideologies on students in an attempt to exert control, but this needs to be more professional and beneficial to the quality of education. It is also reminiscent of the colonization process, where teachers act as masters and students as colonized subjects. (Hossain, 2020).

Viana and Zyngier (2019) argue that the incorporation of literature in the teaching of English as a second language has had a prolonged and debatable past. Currently, literature has been reintroduced into language classrooms, as the connections between literary texts and normal communication have been acknowledged. Nevertheless, literature is often approached in a simplistic manner, where students are required to extract data from texts instead of fully engaging with them. Viana and Zyngier continue that linguists and educators have recognized that literary works possess similar forms and patterns with everyday spoken and written language. By analyzing an educational approach that combines language and literature instruction in a high school English as a Foreign Language setting, this proposal not only presents an innovative method but also provides an evidence-based evaluation from the perspective of high school students. The use of literature in education enhances students' awareness of stylistic devices and their functions encourage active engagement with creative texts and foster the development of critical thinking skills. Furthermore, students' perspectives provide valuable insights into how effectively language and literature can be integrated into the classroom. Additionally, literature education emphasizes the importance of the reader's role in interpreting and understanding texts.

In the syllabus for English, the subject is divided into four different skills. Listening, reading, hearing, and speaking (Skolverket, 2022). In the syllabus, it is written that these four skills are meant to be learned by allowing the students to: develop their ability to understand and interpret English in written and spoken form, develop their ability to formulate themselves and communicate in English in written and spoken form, develop their ability to adapt their language accordingly to different purposes, recipients and contexts, develop their ability to understand cultural and social conditions in different contexts and areas where English is used. In the listening and reading section of the core content, it is written that the students
should take part in exercises that involve literature and other fiction, but also literature in spoken and filmed form. It is clearly stated in the syllabus that teachers are instructed to use literature in the classroom. However, it does not state how a teacher is to impose these guidelines in the classroom, which leaves it up to each individual teacher to decide how to include them in the classroom.
3. Aim / Research questions

The objective of this study is to understand the perspectives and approaches used by English teachers when teaching literature in the form of reading. The study will examine what positive outcomes that reading literature can bring with it and what approaches teachers can use to incorporate it into their lessons. Through this exploration, effective teaching approaches and potential challenges can be identified, which can aid in the development of efficient teaching practices. The study will specifically address the following research questions:

- What positive outcomes come from using literature in the classroom?
- What are some approaches that teachers can use to effectively integrate literature into their classrooms?
4. Method

To help us answer our research questions, we have used different search engines to find articles. We have tried to use Google Scholar but we ended up using Libsearch and ERIC.

4.1 Search Delimitations

When we started our research, we used Google Scholar. We had difficulties finding relevant articles since we found it hard to limit our search. After finding out that we couldn’t exclude articles that were not peer reviewed and after not being satisfied with the search results, we moved on to Libsearch which we find is more user-friendly. We managed to find results that were more relevant scientific articles to our research questions. We searched for keywords such as “literature in classroom”, “literature classroom”, and “positive outcomes from using literature”. After searching these keywords, we found that the results were too many to manage. Therefore we limited our search by searching “literature in the classroom ESL/EFL”, and “literature for young in the classroom”.

We also used the search engine ERIC. We didn’t think of this one in the beginning since we were not familiar with it. However, when we searched with the same keywords as we used with Libsearch, we noticed that we got a lot more results with a broader span. When we used ERIC, we got a lot more results that were from different parts of the world, which can be helpful since we can get a broader experience. In ERIC, we limited our search to peer-reviewed articles that were available to read in ERIC. Since we got too many results for the two of us, we limited the search to articles published after 2014 to get articles that are relevant and not published a long time ago.

4.2 Inclusion criteria

The findings of our research regarding upper secondary schools were limited in scope. The majority of the sources we found pertained to high school students or did not specify an age group. We chose to include these studies as they still provided valuable insights into our research questions. Additionally, a limitation we encountered was that some studies provided valuable research but did not specify the sample size. The sources and studies that we have
found came from all over the world and this strengthens our results because this gives us an insight into how literature in classrooms is handled in other parts of the world and how we can learn and how we can use these studies in Sweden.

4.3 Exclusion criteria

We have chosen to exclude articles that were published before the year 2000 because a lot can change throughout the years and might not be relevant to our research questions since education evolves frequently. We have also chosen to exclude articles that are not peer-reviewed.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of interest</th>
<th>Total number references</th>
<th>References used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies to integrate literature</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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5. Results

In this section, we will present the results of our findings. To make it easier to understand what exactly has answered our two research questions, we are dividing our results into two parts, one part that answers the first question and the second part that answers our second question.

5.1 What positive outcomes come with using literature in the classroom?

We have found several articles that speak about the significance that literature has and should have in the classroom. In the article ‘‘Significance of Literature in Foreign Language Teaching’’, Babaee and Wan Roselezam Bt Wan (2014) write that literature can be used as a significant tool to facilitate students learning, including reasons why it improves students’ language skills in the four language skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading). Babaee and Wan Roselezam Bt Wan write that one of the reasons why teachers should include literature in their classrooms is because it helps learners to learn different language aspects. These different aspects include learning how to use idiomatic expressions correctly, and speak more accurately but also help the learners to become more comfortable and fluent in the language, helping them to become more creative in the target language that they are learning. Babaee and Wan Roselezam Bt Wan also write that when teachers use literature in their language exercises, the students get more familiar with the language which helps them to use the language that they have learned in various conditions. They also write that another benefit of literature education is that it allows students to explore social factors embedded in the different genres of literature. Another positive outcome that comes from literature education is that it provides a natural and meaningful application of language through the use of descriptive language and illustrations found in the literature. This approach to language learning allows students to see the language in context and practice using it in a way that is more engaging and relatable to their own experiences. This can enhance their language proficiency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (Babaee and Wan Roselezam Bt Wan, 2014).
According to Khatib (2011), we can find many positive outcomes from teaching literature in the classroom. According to Khatib, literary texts possess a natural authenticity that makes them valuable resources for language learning. Khatib says that literature deals with topics that are meaningful and relatable for individuals. Authenticity is a key factor in contemporary EFL/ESL literature which is evident in works such as drama and novels. Drama features authentic conversations, emotions, functional language, and contextualized expressions. Similarly, novels offer descriptive writing and other forms of writing that stimulate the imagination and make the language easier to remember. Using literature also boosts students' motivation, according to Khatib. He says that authentic and contextually rich literary texts can be highly motivating for language learners. Literature covers engaging topics and minimal uninteresting ones. Motivation is a driving force that propels learners forward. When students are exposed to material they find enjoyable, their motivation increases, says Khatib.

Another positive outcome that Khatib (2011) writes is that literature can promote cultural and intercultural awareness, since, according to Khatib, the world is becoming all the more globalized. Since the world is becoming more globalized, there is an emphasis on shared needs and wants as opposed to individual needs. Literature can be an effective tool for developing language learners’ competence since literature can involve universal themes. Khatib means that because of this globalization, there is a need for collaboration between language-related fields such as ELT, and not only in politics and economics. He continues and says that literature can go in depth into different universal themes such as love, hatred, death, and nature, which are all commonly shared traits across all languages and cultures. When exploring the similarities and differences between cultures and languages, literature can deepen our understanding of the world, Khatib says.

One important outcome that comes from working with literature is that it improves the student's language skills and increases their grammar and vocabulary knowledge, according to Khatib. He says that literature encompasses various forms of language forms and topics, from casual form to formal. Khatib argues that literature increases grammar and vocabulary knowledge because literature encompasses a vast array of vocabulary, dialogue, and texts.

In his article, Khatib (2011) mentions the four language skills (writing, listening, speaking, writing) and explains what type of exercise suits said language skill. For speaking, He says that poetry can be seen as difficult due to poems sometimes using difficult words.
Nonetheless, poems are an excellent tool to expand the students' grammar knowledge, Khatib says. Regarding speaking skills, poems, novels, and short stories are also relatable to the student’s personal experiences, creating opportunities for lively discussions in language classes. Encouraging students to speak openly about their thoughts and opinions engages them in critical discussions which improves their speaking proficiency, says Khatib. To enhance the student’s listening skills, learners can listen to different forms of literature such as poems, short stories, and novels. For reading, literature can be used to enhance students’ skills in extensive reading and intensive reading. It can also be used to develop students’ reading skills such as skim-reading, and scanning. Last but not least, literature can be used to develop students’ writing skills. They can partake in exercises such as finishing a poem or short story, which according to Khatib, is very encouraging for the students. Another example of how you can help develop students’ writing skills by using literature is by having them rewrite the end of a story, or writing a story from another character's perspective (Khatib, 2011).

In her article, Freyn (2017) writes that there are several positive outcomes from using and learning literature in the classroom. Freyn writes that literature is a source for language learning and that literature helps students develop several skills, such as personal enrichment, language development, and cultural enrichment. She also writes that by using literature in the classroom, the students develop their language acquisition, but also helps the students to understand different cultures, develop their ability to understand words, and also help the students to be able to express their own opinions and thoughts regarding literature.

In her article, Freyn (2017) mentions the benefits of using poetry in the classroom. Freyn writes that poetry should be considered as a valuable and authentic tool for facilitating language learning. Freyn writes that by using effective teaching strategies, poetry can be helpful in increasing students' motivation and interest towards poetry. She continues and writes that poetry adds depth to the language, giving the students a unique perspective that is not limited by grammar or syntax. This, in return, gives room for the students to develop and expand their language vocabulary.
5.2 What are some approaches that teachers can use to effectively integrate literature into their classroom?

Motivating students to learn English is becoming an increasingly pressing issue. Research has shown that young learners in Vietnam may struggle with confusion and frustration when difficult words are not explained by their teacher or when grammar and style points are missing. Similarly, a study conducted in Beirut, Lebanon found that the use of uninteresting materials, a lack of new learning experiences, and a disconnect between English courses and future careers were major factors that hindered motivation to learn the language. The key to engaging and retaining young learners' interest in English is through extensive reading. Extensive reading with the help of literature has been shown to increase interest and improve confidence and fluency in speaking and writing in English (Badria and Khaled, 2014).

Badria and Khaled (2014), also state that teaching the basics of English to children has been a fundamental goal of education throughout history. This is particularly important as English is widely considered the primary medium of instruction worldwide. The abundance of literature on this subject reflects the significant research interest in all aspects of teaching, learning, comprehension, and speaking English. The authors looked at different approaches that have been proposed for incorporating literature into the education of English as a foreign language for students. The method employed by the instructor is contingent upon their chosen model for instruction. These models include the cultural model, which considers literature as a means of gaining insight into a specific culture. This model is commonly utilized by educators in EFL classrooms, particularly in post-secondary settings. It delves into the literary text's political, historical, and societal context, as well as its genre and literary movements. The primary focus of the language model in EFL instruction is on the student. Badria and Khaled stated also that as students engage with a literary text, they are encouraged to pay close attention to the ways in which language is used, leading to greater comprehension of the meaning and improved overall proficiency in the English language. Teachers in EFL classrooms can utilize this model by focusing on vocabulary and grammar, or by utilizing stylistic analysis. This entails a detailed examination of the linguistic features present in the literary text, helping students arrive at a deeper understanding of the text and improving their ability to interpret literature. This model is particularly well-suited for young learners in EFL classrooms. Additionally, Badria and Khaled argue that the personal growth
model follows a step-by-step approach and, like the language model, is also student-centered. This approach encourages students to express their own personal experiences, opinions, and emotions. Its primary focus is to foster interaction between the reader and the text in English, helping learners to retain the language more effectively. Under this model, students are encouraged to view literary texts as personal narratives. It acknowledges the powerful impact literature can have on individuals and seeks to harness that potential in the EFL classroom setting for young learners.

Looking into Khatib's (2011) article about what strategies might work when using literature in classrooms he states that the language based-model primarily views literature as a tool for language development and enhancement. The primary focus is on the linguistic and discoursal elements of literature, rather than on the literary or aesthetic aspects. However, it is important to ensure that the emphasis on language does not detract from the enjoyment of reading literature. Furthermore, the model (literature as Content or Culture) works excellent for introducing students to the cultural aspects of a language such as its history, literary theories, genre characteristics, author biographies, geography, customs, politics, art, and more. Khatib also mentioned the model literature as Personal Growth or Enrichment and this model gives the students a chance to see their own personal experiences as a means of engaging students with literary works. In this model, the focus is not on learning new vocabulary or analyzing linguistic features, but on allowing students to appreciate the literary experience and connect it to their own real-life experiences. Additionally, Khatib stated that the Story Grammar Approach (SGA) is based on the idea that there is a connection between the reader and the text. This approach emphasizes the reader's understanding of the text structure and is closely related to genre awareness in textual analysis. Understanding the differences between different text types, such as narrative and expository, can help learners better predict the structure of a text and how ideas are developed within it.

Campbell (2019) says that literature promotes students' cognitive development and students should engage with it. The literature emphasizes the value of literary analysis and improves students' critical thinking. Literature also highlights how young adult novels can provide opportunities for students to delve into history, language, and culture, thereby fostering democratic principles. Campbell continues to say that literature circles offer students a chance to analyze a text as a group. By discussing it together, they publicly share their perspectives and are encouraged to reevaluate them. This includes not only the benefits of
this approach to literary study but also the difficulties that may arise, such as limitations in following the established protocol and a desire for increased accountability among members. Literature circles aim to facilitate authentic discussions about literature and broaden students' perspectives. One approach to reading focuses on helping students recognize the valuable insights authors impart in their writing. This selection process should embody democratic principles, giving students a voice in the decision-making. The students in this study show the impact of having their opinions considered. When students have a hand in selecting the books they read, they remain invested and motivated in their education. Before participating in literature circle groups, it's advisable for students to get familiar with collaborative work in pairs. Campbell suggests forming groups of four, noting that groups of five or more may result in someone being left out due to a lack of attention from other members. The article emphasizes the objective of fostering students' ability to be "text critics" by teaching them to read, question, and analyze the author's message. This is achieved through providing students with reading aids and establishing structures and routines that allow them to capture their thoughts as text critics, so they can share their findings with their literature circle peers.

Another way to support literature circles is by giving students questions to think about as they read, such as: “How would you describe the pace of the book? Is the plot moving quickly or slowly and how does it influence your enjoyment of the story?” or “Can you give an overview of the narrator in your book? ‘Is their perspective credible to you’?”

In this way of working with literature circles, students learn to examine alternatives and weigh options, fostering a sense of connectedness and expanding their perspective. This type of literacy and creative thinking will be necessary for success in college, and the workplace, and to tackle future challenges by engaging in informed discussions and finding solutions Campbell (2019).
6. Discussion

The significance of reading literature in the classroom has been extensively discussed in various articles. Babaee and Wan Roselezaam Bt Wan (2014) highlight that literature is a valuable tool to facilitate students' language learning, as it helps them improve their language skills, including speaking, listening, writing, and reading. Literature also allows students to explore social factors embedded in different genres of literature while providing a natural and meaningful application of the target language. Khatib (2021) supports the significance of literature in the classroom by highlighting its positive outcomes, including its ability to promote cultural and intercultural awareness, improve students' language skills, increase their grammar and vocabulary knowledge, and enhance their motivation. He also explains how literature can be used to develop different language skills, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Freyn (2017) also emphasizes the positive outcomes of using and learning literature in the classroom. She writes that literature is a source for language learning and helps students develop several skills, such as personal enrichment, language development, and cultural enrichment. In addition, literature helps students understand different cultures, develop their ability to understand words and express their own opinions and thoughts. In the core content of the syllabus for years 7-9, it is stated that students should partake in English language exercises that include literature and some forms of fiction in written, spoken, or filmed form. It is also stated that students should partake in English language exercises that include songs and poems. What is written in the syllabus aligns with our findings when researching our research questions. Babaee and Wan Roselezaam Bt Wan (2014) highly encourage teachers to include some forms of literature since it brings many positive outcomes with it. In Babaee and Wan Roselezaam Bt Wan’s article, they write about how literature can be used to train all of the four language skills that are mentioned in the syllabus (speaking, writing, listening, reading). Furthermore, in the purpose section of the syllabus for years 7-9, it is also stated that the students should be given opportunities to develop their ability to understand cultural and social conditions in different contexts and areas where English is spoken. In addition, Khatib writes in his article that literature can promote cultural and intercultural awareness, which aligns with the syllabus. By promoting cultural and intercultural awareness, the students are able to understand different types of cultures where English is spoken and are able to adapt their language accordingly.
The integration of literature into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom has been a topic of interest for many educators. Three articles explored the various techniques teachers can use to effectively integrate literature into their classrooms. According to Badria and Khaled (2014), the language model in EFL instruction focuses on the student and encourages them to pay close attention to the ways language is used in a literary text. This leads to greater comprehension and improved overall proficiency in English. To support the first article, we found another article that agrees on the similar strategies on what techniques teachers can use to effectively integrate literature into their classroom, therefore Khatib (2021) also mentions the language-based model, but cautions against letting the emphasis on language detract from the enjoyment of reading literature. According to the English syllabus year 7-9 Skolverket (2022) literature and other fiction should be integrated into student's education and by doing this students increase their linguistic phenomena, including pronunciation, words and fixed linguistic expressions, grammatical structures and sentence construction as well as spelling in the students' own production and interaction. Using the techniques from the two articles above, students will achieve these areas as indicated by the school board.

Campbell (2019) highlights the benefits of literature circles, where students analyze a text as a group and publicly share their perspectives, promoting critical thinking and fostering democratic principles. The literature circles should be small, with groups of four or fewer students, to ensure that everyone has a chance to participate. In the national curriculum for students years 7-9 it is stated that teaching must be conducted in democratic ways of working and prepare students to actively participate in community life. It should develop their ability to take personal responsibility. By participating in the planning and evaluation of the daily teaching and being able to choose courses, subjects, themes, and activities, students can develop their ability to exercise influence and take responsibility. Students should also have knowledge of the principles of democracy and develop their ability to work in democratic ways. This aligns with the article that Campbell wrote, working with literature in the classroom literature highlights the benefits of young adult novels in promoting cultural, linguistic, and historical literacy among students, thus fostering democratic ideals. Campbell notes that literature circles provide a platform for students to engage in group analysis of a text. Skolverket (2022) states that education must convey and anchor respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society rests.
7. Conclusion

In light of these arguments, it can be argued that literature plays a vital role in language education. By answering our research questions, we have proven that the use of literature in the classroom can help students develop their language skills, increase their cultural awareness, and enhance their motivation, in which all of our findings agree on. Teachers should therefore consider incorporating literature into their language teaching practices to support their students' language development. By answering our research questions, we have now been able to understand why someone should use literature in their classroom, but we have also found several approaches for how someone would be able to use different types of literature in the classroom.

Incorporating literature into the EFL classroom can increase students' interest and motivation to learn the language. By focusing on the cultural, language, or personal growth models, teachers can improve students' comprehension and fluency in speaking and writing English. By engaging students in literary analysis and discussion through literature circles, students can develop their critical thinking skills and gain a deeper appreciation for literature. Overall, the use of literature in the EFL classroom offers a wealth of opportunities for students to improve their language skills while also fostering their personal growth.

We found our motivation to research this area during our VFU periods. When we both arrived at our VFU schools, we wanted to try out everything that we had learned during our education, but also things that we were going to do that we had not learned yet. We quickly noticed that in the syllabus, it was stated that students should partake in activities that include literature, but we couldn’t find anything that spoke about how to use literature. Thanks to this course and this research, we have now been able to learn how to use literature, and what benefits it brings with it. To further delve into this topic, we would like to take part in research that shows how teachers use literature in their classrooms in real life. The research could involve something such as interviews and/or observation, since it could prove to be helpful in our education and when we start working as teachers. By taking part in this type of research, we could get an insight of what teaching strategies and methods are useful when using literature in the classroom.
8. Reference list


