Reading Fiction in a Second-Language Classroom

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Abstract
This article considers the role of reading fiction within the school subject of Swedish as a second language. It examines how a group of advanced second-language learners in a Swedish upper secondary school read and discuss a contemporary Swedish novel, how they interact with the text and with each other in relation to the text. Further, it analyses which forms of reading the students use. It reports on a qualitative, empirical study based on field studies, transcriptions of tape-recorded interaction as well as written texts. The results indicate that second-language learners in this context have a positive attitude to reading and discussing what they read using different forms of reading. They often compare the content of the text to their own lives. One conclusion drawn is that literature teaching could be integrated into a single Swedish subject in order to create even more meaningful interactions between students from different backgrounds and that literature can be a means leading to language development as well as personal development.

Keywords: second-language learners, literature reception, forms of reading, pedagogy of literature and language, democracy

Introduction
Swedish upper secondary schools offer two subjects of Swedish; Swedish as L1 (mother tongue or first language) and Swedish as L2 (second language). Students with a mother tongue other than Swedish are given the opportunity to choose which subject they prefer to study. In the syllabus for Swedish as L2, reading fiction is not given as much priority as in the subject of Swedish as L1. Instead, Swedish as L2 focuses on language form and comparative language analysis (Skolverket 2011a, b; Economou 2013).

However, during the last decade a number of reports have shown that the reading ability of Swedish students is declining in comparison with both earlier national surveys and international ones (Gustavsson and Rosén 2005; Skolverket 2007, 2012; SOU 2012). Informative as well as fictional texts are included in the aforementioned surveys. Besides decoding and understanding, reading proficiency includes the ability to interpret and reflect on issues in the text.

During the same period of time as these reports and surveys were published, the Swedish National Agency for Education reported that multilingual students are...
over-represented among those students who do not reach the targets of the final year of compulsory school. In addition, another survey showed that 30% of students with an immigrant background do not reach the elementary reading level and, among those born abroad, every second student does not master enough reading comprehension skills in order to learn other subjects (Skolverket 2003). The question therefore arises: Why does the reading of literature play a minor role in the syllabus for Swedish as a second language in upper secondary school? Research shows that reading fiction helps students with their reading proficiency. This proficiency includes interpreting, reflecting, and making inferences (e.g. Liberg 2001; Myrberg 2001). Further, recent Swedish research on literature instruction emphasises that reading and interpretation are particular practices that can be developed by teaching (Olin-Scheller and Tengberg 2013; Tengberg 2011).

Several studies have examined the teaching of literature in the school subject of Swedish as L1 (Liné 1984; Elmfeldt 1997; Molloy 2002; Hultin 2006; Bommarco 2006; Ewald 2007; Jönsson 2007; Bergman 2007; Asplund 2010; Tengberg 2011). Research about the study of literature in the subject of Swedish as L2 has been neglected and this study, although it is limited, can be regarded as a contribution to this field.

I am thus interested in what role reading fiction may have in L2 classrooms and, more specifically, in a context where advanced second-language students read and interpret a modern Swedish novel. The students attend the course “Swedish as a Second Language” at a Swedish upper secondary school. The content of the novel in question closely relates to the lives and realities of young people today, in both its time and setting. The purpose of the study is to find out how the students interact with the text and what readings they choose to make of the text, including how they respond to it and how they respond to each other in relation to the text. In this article, using theoretical and empirical means I specifically investigate which themes of the novel the students are concerned with and which forms of reading the students use in this particular context.

**Background**

Cummins (2001) advocates that the teaching of literature can be a vital part of second-language acquisition where identification and a critical approach are central components. Students’ cultural, linguistic and personal identities are confirmed through interaction where their experiences are expressed and made visible. The students are encouraged to be critically reflective and to increase their social consciousness (2001, 94). Far too often students, especially second-language learners, have to leave their experiences and cultural baggage, that is to say their identities, at home because in school only the norms and values of the majority are in focus (Runfors 2003; Bunar 2009). Thus, if students are to be committed to their studies and to their cognitive development, their identities have to be confirmed in interaction
with teachers and other students. This approach is what Cummins calls *investment of identity* (2001, 95).

Further, Bradford (2006) discusses the possibilities fiction may hold in second-language teaching. He points out that L2 teachers use literature as a tool for language acquisition in three ways. First, the reading of fiction can support students by increasing their vocabulary and, second, students will get used to certain syntactic patterns that are not so frequent in spoken language (2006, 202). Some teachers also use literature in a third way which involves reading literature of the target language to facilitate understanding of the traditions, values and lifestyles in the new society (2006, 203). However, this last aspect of the role of fiction in second-language teaching is doubtful. Sweden is today defined by multiculturalism and diversity and the effect of this on education is complex. One can no longer expect or cherish a monolingual and monocultural classroom. Students have multiple frames of references today and these should be of great value and be met with respect in the classroom.

Critical forms of reading are strongly associated with critical literacy, which in turn is connected to power. By gaining access to language and literature students can become critically reflective about the world. Janks (2013) states “critical literacy is about enabling young people to *read* both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources” (227). This mixture of cognitive skills and social practice means that complete literacy is not just the ability to decode texts and the semantic competence to understand, but also pragmatic competence for everyday life and the ability to be critically reflective towards society. Both Cummins (2000/2001) and Janks (2010) argue that the ability to develop critical literacy is vital to students, especially second-language learners, to enable them to read between the lines and understand how power is exercised. Thus, teaching critical literacy concerns what texts do with their readers and which purposes the texts serve.

However, one should not forget that literary texts and their language, structure and literary devices are part of the critical reading. It is not only through the form of a literary text that new ways of thinking and feeling can be revealed, says Persson (2007, 202). This critical form of reading may, beyond a focus on form and literary devices, also have a ‘critical culture’ approach, something that resembles Cummins’ transformative pedagogy.

Langer (2005) states that a reader’s understanding and interpretation moves back and forth continuously in different stances. This action primarily concerns the reader and the text. In order to understand in which ways the students in this study interact with the text, including how they respond to it and how they respond to each other in relation to the text, Langer’s theoretical stances are useful, as applied in the context of book talks and writings. Langer points out four stances readers take in relation to a text: (1) being out and stepping into an envisionment; (2) being in
and moving through an envisionment; (3) stepping back and rethinking what one knows; and (4) stepping out and objectifying the experience (2005, 31 f). In the first two stances, the readers are focused on the envisionment in order to understand the text, while in the third they focus on their own experiences and knowledge about the world in relation to the text. Finally, in the fourth stance the readers objectify the envisionment in order to reflect on and keep the text and the world apart. In the last one there is also a focus on the author’s craftsmanship and on the text’s structure and literary devices, similar to Persson’s critical reading mentioned above. Thus, the readers start with the well-known to be able to meet the foreign and thereafter make reflections and experience something new. The stances will be applied and further explained in the analysis section of this article.

Thus, by combining the different approaches to reading fiction mentioned above a possibility would arise to help students become skilled readers. This study also examines the different forms of reading employed by the students. In this context, Tengberg’s categorisation of different forms of reading distinguished in his thesis (2011) may also be of valuable support. Tengberg’s study (2011) was performed during one term and included four teachers and over 200 students at a secondary school. Its prime aim was to explore the pedagogical possibilities of fiction-oriented discussions and, more specifically, which forms of reading could be distinguished and promoted in the book talks. He uses the term “forms of reading” to describe the different ways the students read and interpret a text (a short story) in their discussions. The data analyses, mainly interaction and reception analyses, were based on video recordings of classroom discussions, interviews, field notes and, finally, written responses from students before and after discussing the text. The six different forms of reading are plot-, meaning-, value-, subject-, intention- and meta-cognitive oriented and will be further presented in the analysis section.

The forms of reading should not be seen as static; on the contrary, they often overlap. Likewise, they are not complete and more forms can be added as this study concludes. Despite this, I regard Tengberg’s forms of reading as clear and differentiated pedagogical tools and also useful as theoretical devices for my data.

**Methods and material**

The study takes an ethnographic approach and its aim is to explore how a group of advanced second-language learners interpret and interact with a modern Swedish novel, as well as with each other in relation to the text. The ethnographic research tradition emphasises the researcher’s presence in the studied environment (Delamonte 2008) and, in my case, I am a researcher in my own classroom.

Doing research in one’s own field of practice and thereby having dual roles can be complicated. As a teacher researcher I have two tasks – teaching and doing research – and these should take place simultaneously. I am thus an *observant participant*, as opposed to a researcher who comes from the outside – a *participant*...
observer (Ray 1996). The disadvantage of the dual role might be that my teaching context is too well known to be problematised. In order to create the necessary distance, I chose to wait with the transcription, interpretation and analysis until the end of term. I also use the word “teacher” when I present the context of teaching and also in further passages in order to create distance.

The advantages of being a researching teacher with an inside perspective is that I am well known to the students and familiar with their situation within the school context. Several studies with researching teachers have been successful (e.g. Elmfeldt 1997; Bommarco 2006; Jönsson 2007; Asplund 2010) in the field of didactics in Swedish as L1.

Apart from the ethnographic approach, this study also rests on different theories of literary response and reception (previously mentioned) in order to answer the questions of how the novel is read and interpreted. These theories are mainly Tengberg’s forms of reading (2011) and Langer’s stances (2005).

**Site and participants**

The school involved in the study is situated in a large town and the 16 students are in the last year of upper secondary school. The students attend either the Natural Science programme or the Social Science programme, but are all taking the course “Swedish as a Second Language”. The group is multilingual with nine different mother tongues (see the appendix). Some students were born in Sweden and the remaining have lived in Sweden for 3 to 14 years. Thus, the group is heterogeneous with many different backgrounds and experiences.

In line with the principles of the Swedish Science Council of Ethics (Vetenskapsrådet 2011), a written inquiry requesting permission to record the students’ book discussions and collect essays was handed out. The inquiry stated the purpose of the study as well as the fact that the collected data were to be treated confidentially. The ethical considerations may be seen as problematic as the researcher was also the students’ teacher in a power embedded practice. Hoel (1997) states that there is an ethical problem with a “teacher-researcher” as he or she may focus on the positive aspects of the teaching, leaving out the more problematic aspects such as e.g. critical comments from the students. I was aware of this during the analytical process of the material. With the different empirical sources mentioned above, this problem could not be eliminated, but at least diminished. Further, the fact that the students could decline without any negative consequences was emphasised several times during the process. In fact, all of the students chose to participate throughout the period of the study.

**Material and procedures**

Based on the students’ mixed preferences for literature as well as her own didactic considerations, the teacher decided to let the class read the novel *Call it What the
**Hell You Like** written by Marjaneh Bakhtiari (2005). The novel is set in the present and the surroundings were well known to the students as it took place in their home town. From the teacher’s perspective, this novel about searching for identity was thought to be something that would appeal to the students.

The empirical base for the study consists of recorded book talks, students’ writings and written evaluations about the novel (see Table 1).

| Table 1. Types and quantity of data          |
|---------------------------------------------|
| Recorded book talks | 56 pages |
| Essays                       | 16 students, 33 pages |
| Written evaluations       | 15 students, 8 pages |
| Short field notes         | 8 pages   |

The data collection took place over a period of 6 weeks, with altogether 12 lessons lasting for approximately 70 minutes each. In the sequence of book talks, which lasted for eight lessons, the students were divided into three groups. Each lesson started with listening to the audiobook version for about 5 to 10 minutes in order to bring the students into the context of the novel. Each group had a discussion leader who structured the discussion and made sure the participants did not interrupt each other. The teacher alternated between the three groups, only participating in parts of the discussions.

Apart from reading, the students had prepared each lesson of book talk with their own choices of quotations (including comments) that had challenged them or affected them in some way. Further, they were given the task of bringing questions to the group to discuss, either about their understanding of the content of the novel or about certain aspects or topics. A number of questions were also given to the students by the teacher at the beginning of the book talks, but these questions were mainly supposed to facilitate an understanding of the novel’s context. The transcriptions of the book talks follow an orthography close to written language (Norrby 2004, 89).

In the remaining four lessons the students worked with vocabulary and wrote essays. A majority of the students wrote about the novel’s characters and how they could identify with them. They also wrote about similar experiences they had had concerning the novel’s plot. The writing was part of a homework assignment and the students finished it during lessons.

During the final lesson, the students were given a written task to evaluate the sessions with the novel and the novel itself consisting of a maximum of 300 words. In addition to the book talks and the students’ writings, short field notes contributed to the data. The students’ quotations in the book talks and in their essays are marked with pseudonyms.
Data analysis
There are several different forms of qualitative content analyses and the common factor is that they discern different themes, events or categories (Gunter 2000, 91). In this study, thematic content analysis is used. It has an aim to find patterns and then themes, enabling an interpretation of the material (Titscher et al. 2000, 62; Graneheim and Lundman 2004).

In order to analyse in which ways the students interacted with the text and with each other, I made several readings of the material so I could discern different themes. The interpretation and analysis of the material went through several steps which started after the period of data collection in order to create a necessary distance. To get a grasp of the material, my first step was a tentative analysis (Woods 2002, 121) which meant that I first read the transcriptions of the book talks and the essays several times. During the second step, parts of the texts were picked out and marked and labelled with keywords of the content. The surrounding text was included, so the context was clear. The next step was to discern patterns that had emerged and which could be categorised into several themes and subthemes. Finally, in the last step these themes were analysed and three overarching themes were discerned since the students had returned to these both in their writing and when talking. These themes are language, culture clashes and, finally, integration. The different forms of reading were discerned within these themes.

Brief synopsis of Call it What the Hell You Want
The Irandoust family, who emigrated from Iran to Sweden in the hope of a better life, are the focal point of the book. The rebellious daughter Bahar is the main character. Her parents, Amir and Panthea, are well educated and have high expectations of the new country. Amir, previously a publisher and a poet, becomes a pizza baker and Panthea, who has a PhD in Physics, works in a kindergarten. Bahar refuses to be seen as a representative of Iranians or immigrants while her younger brother Shervin does his upmost to fit in with the Swedish culture.

Finding – The power of language, culture and identity
In the following sections, the analyses of the principal reflections that emerged when the students interacted with the text and which readings they choose to make of the text are organised in three themes – language, culture clashes and, finally, integration and identity.

Language – “language makes another person look at you in a different way”
This section analyses the students’ book talks focusing on the students’ understanding of the book, about language and their views on how the dialogues were
related in the novel. The students also describe how they recognise and react to different language situations described in the book.

The students helped each other with words, expressions and other areas of uncertainty. The book discussions provided many examples of what Gibbons calls *scaffolding* (2006, 29f), where the students amongst themselves filled in any gaps in the understanding that may have existed after the reading. This is included in Langer’s first stance; the reader comes into envisionment and tries to understand the plot, e.g. when unknown words are read (2005, 32). It also points to what Tengberg calls plot-oriented forms of reading. According to Tengberg, these orientations enables a direct or a literal understanding of the plot and the context which constitutes the fictive world (2011, 197) as well as an explanation of the characters’ actions. The tasks assigned to the students by the teacher mainly comprised this reading form to ensure that they would understand the course of action before they immersed themselves in their own interpretations and reflections. Examples of such tasks included vocabulary, a description of the characters and the relationships between them, as well as short summaries of what they had read previous to each lesson. This form is necessary to help the reader understand the context and plot of the story but, according to Tengberg, there is a risk that the reader will become unable to move on to further forms of reading. There is no indication of this in the findings of this study.

All groups of students express different views on how the author relates ethnolect (a variety of language used by a certain ethnic or cultural group) and dialect. In one group for example, Diraf thinks that the fact that the dialogue is partly written phonetically makes it more difficult to understand and is unnecessary, while Dieh thinks that it is good since it provides a more accurate reflection of reality. Dieh says that “It would have sounded strange if the author had written ‘she is really well behaved at home’ and then ‘he said with an accent’. It sounds stupid”. In another group, the participants agree that it is good that the author uses casual language and slang, the local dialect and a Persian accent in the dialogue to create an impression of the reality the author describes.

Here, the students’ opinions diverge from the text when they express their preferences. This aspect of the novel was important for all three groups as the majority thought that the language in the dialogues made the text more convincing. These readings may be seen as in line with value-oriented forms, which Tengberg suggests can be an aesthetic criticism, with their valuations of language and style (2011, 211) and part of Persson’s critical reading, with its focus on form. The content also illustrates Langer’s last stance where the reader objectifies the text, judges it and focuses on how the author builds her text (2005, 35).

Kaln reacts strongly to the views held by the character Pernilla on immigrants; he claims that she, notwithstanding good intentions, still judges people based on their Swedish ethnolect. Several group members argue that Pernilla ought to adopt a
broader perspective on immigrants to be able to see all “those who really struggle and who really want to move on” (Masam). The students also spend a great deal of time on how the main character’s mother, Panthea, struggles to learn Swedish. The discussions tend to focus on the frustration Panthea experiences as she tries to learn Swedish and how different alphabets and grammatical structures can cause problems when learning a new language. Dieh says that the frustration arising from the inability to articulate his thoughts is like “waking up from a nightmare only to find that you are unable to scream. I think it has happened to all of us, that you are so scared that you want to scream but you can’t, the words don’t come out”. The students also choose to discuss quotes and passages concerning body language and how Panthea’s facial expressions do not match her words. Yene is of the opinion that body language is used differently in different cultures and incorrect interpretation can lead to communication problems. Several students provided examples from their own lives.

All three groups commented on a scene in the book where the music teacher Carina organises a culture day and encourages her students to bring music from their home countries. The discussion revolves around the fact that the students listen to music with lyrics in many different languages, but almost never in their mother tongue. The students continue to compare how they code switch, i.e. mix languages. They speak Swedish in school, and they speak both Swedish and their mother tongue at home. “Earlier, we only spoke Arabic at home, now we mix. You forget your own language” (Heelh).

Even though meta linguistic concepts are not expressed, accents, ethnolects, grammar, language and code-switching are the subjects the students are interested in. In these areas the students often move between the world of fiction and their own world as they compare the characters and their lives with their own experiences. Many personal experiences of learning a language and of the shortcomings of the Swedish language could be heard in the discussions. The forms of reading which Tengberg calls subject-oriented can be discerned here and the experience of the literary character is not made alien but is more often similar to those experiences that the reader is used to (2011, 220). The border between the fictive characters and the readers’ reality tends to be blurred. The students discuss events from the book, recognise themselves and express their own experiences and thoughts, while at the same time they listen to and confirm each other. They are active, engaged and dare to invest themselves and their identities in the learning process (Cummins 2001, 97).

The students also talk about views on language skills they come across in their own environment and which structural obstacles they see in Swedish society. In the following quote, two students talk about the poor treatment of Panthea at the Job Centre, where she fails to find employment as a physicist, a job she has been trained for:
Heelb: Yes, I think it is a massive waste of talent. You shouldn’t be allowed to waste and destroy a talent like that.
Dieh: Yes, but sometimes you look at a person in a slightly more negative light even if you don’t mean to. If he or she doesn’t speak the language as well as others. That’s just the way it is. I know several examples of this. You become how you speak. She [Panthea] dropped to a level where a child teaches her. So, the language makes a person look at you in a different way.

The students react strongly to society’s views on language and what language obstacles can lead to. Perspectives shift, in particular when the students reflect on Panthea’s frustration with the language and her position in society. This is what Persson calls narrative imagination (2007, 264), i.e. the ability to change perspectives. It is also possible to see evidence of critical reading when the students adopt a critical attitude to structures in society that fail to value an educated work force due to the existence of inferior language skills. The students draw on their own experiences, but these experiences are brought up to a more general level. This form of reading will be discussed later in the analysis.

**Culture clashes – “to tar everybody with the same brush”**
The students spend a great deal of time on the subject of authority and that there may be different views on authority. The students often quote the book’s description of the teacher Max Levin, in particular when the parents dress up before going to a parent-teacher meeting with Bahar. When they eventually meet Max, they find him to be unkempt and they are concerned that such a man teaches their daughter. Based on this episode in the book, Yasan reflects on the difference in the perception of teachers in his home country Iran and in Sweden. He thinks that there is no respect here, “For example, you do not use the teachers’ first names in Iran”.

The Prophet Mohammed says that teachers and parents should be treated with respect, according to Dari; “the Prophet himself was a teacher”. There appears to be general agreement among the students that authorities are important. Bahar’s parents think that their children lack respect and the groups often cite quotes related to this theme. Several students in the discussion groups believe that their Swedish friends have less respect for teachers and parents than they do themselves. Kaln is of the opinion that her Swedish friends expect their homes to be run on democratic principles but “if your mother asks you to take out the rubbish, that has nothing to do with democracy – it is more a matter of doing her a favour”. Tama is the only student who expresses a different opinion; she says that it is not only a question of respect but that many of her friends actually fear their parents.

These subject-oriented forms of reading are noticeable where personal and emotional experiences are part of the discussion, in particular when the students compare themselves with their Swedish friends’ relations to teachers and parents. According to Tengberg, a personal experience can create empathy and recognition in
a text which enables the students to reach a deeper understanding of the characters and their actions (2011, 216f). The content of the students’ talk is similar to the second stance in Langer’s categorisation. As readers, we use new information to go beyond what we already know and we question motives, reasons and feelings in relation to our knowledge of the text and about our own lives (2005, 33).

The students also talk about food and social events as examples of cultural clashes. One group discusses how strange it seems to have your meatballs with jam, and that Swedes always insist on saying thank you for everything, as expressed in the novel. Annes says that Panthea is given a rude response by her Swedish colleagues when she tries to figure out how Midsummer is celebrated. Contrary to what she expected, Pantheas does not receive a friendly invitation to the Midsummer celebration. Instead, she is greeted by silence. Annes thinks that this episode in the book is an example of a culture clash and thinks that Swedes are boring and inhospitable. She is herself used to her Arabic friends always inviting acquaintances for dinner. Faro objects softly and says that you should not “tar everybody with the same brush”. The book characters’ behaviour is scrutinised and evaluated in these discussions. In Tengberg’s description of the value-oriented form there is, apart from the aesthetic critique, also an ethic which affects the characters’ moral actions (2011, 211) and this can clearly be discerned in this context, as well as what Persson includes in critical reading with its critical approach.

The relationship to time is addressed in a quote that Diraf includes; “A Swedish half hour. That’s at least one hour in ‘blattetime’ (colloquial for immigrant time)” and he continues to explain how Swedes are more precise with respect to time than is usual in some other cultures, and this may be regarded as unpleasant. Another group discusses whether certain traditions are Swedish or not. Tama contributes with her quote and commentary:

“Nobody among them knew that coffee and the whole coffee culture came all the way from Turkey to Europe.” Yes, certain traditions which are generally regarded as Swedish are in fact not Swedish. But many are stubborn, often. But culture is always in a state of change, it has changed and it will change. But not everybody is willing to accept this. And perhaps the pace of change is a bit quicker now.

The students’ choices of quotes illustrate that it is important for them to discuss current affairs, such as the status of women in Islam. All group members seem to have a uniform view of this. The teacher, who listens to this exchange, interjects with a question concerning the equality of women in order to stimulate a discussion, but gets no response. The boys and the girls in the group seem to think that the status of women is equal to that of men, and that they are “treated like queens”. The discussions rarely lead to changes in opinion and what Persson refers to as democratic literature teaching. A confrontation between opposing values and views is more or less absent in this context.
One group discusses questions about democracy in response to Mhodi’s choice of quotes concerning freedom of speech and democracy, which the book’s characters discuss. Mhodi defends freedom of speech and explains that it is still not possible to say ‘the truth’ in his homeland of Iraq. Kaln argues that there must be a limit to freedom of speech, and refers to the caricature drawings of the Prophet which she thinks were made just for the purpose of infuriating people. Mhodi agrees with her and gives another example – a priest in the USA torched the Koran. Mhodi wraps up their discussion: “I haven’t seen any Mullah torch the bible or the Torah or anything like that”.

These dialogues may serve as examples and illustrate content with overall aspects of society where things are questioned and what Cummins calls critical reading (2001, 16). They are also in line with the critical literacy which Janks (2010) advocates. However, no larger confrontations or exchanges are seen and it is instead consistency that prevails in the discussions. Similar to the dialogues about which problems may arise due to a lack of language proficiency, this is also an area where the students can extend the content to other aspects of society that are difficult to categorise to Tengberg’s forms of reading. I suggest that another form could be added here, one I would label a society-oriented form, where aspects from the text are extended to include larger aspects than the mere personal as in the subject- and value-oriented forms (Tengberg 2011).

Integration and identification – “But then you are a part-time Swede”

The book is permeated by topics that touch upon integration and identity and these are important to all three groups. Some of the students thought that the book would primarily be of interest to those unfamiliar with the issues faced by immigrants and not primarily themselves as readers. The teacher’s choice of a novel with a familiar theme can thus be questioned and even mildly resisted. Several references are made to how the Irandoust family want to get used to and become part of the Swedish culture, while they want to preserve the Iranian culture through, for example, home furnishing. Yene says that “it feels as if it is mainly her /Bahar’s/ parents who try to fit into society”. They discuss Bahar’s ambivalence towards Swedish culture and Iranian culture. Yasan is of the view that coming to Sweden was difficult for Bahar; “she moves from an isolated place to suddenly swim in the ocean without being able to swim”. Several students feel that it is positive that Bahar is proud and that she does not want any cultural label. Tamar refers to the local councillor in the book, originally from the Czech Republic, who claims to be a champion of immigrants’ rights. Tamar says that she gets angry when she reads about her, because “she says that she is Swedish, she is married to a Swedish man, her children have Swedish names, and you could say that she is Swedish. And then she claims to be fighting for the immigrants?”. This mirrors an emotional response to the text. The interaction in
the group continues and this leads to a long discussion on ‘Swedishness’. A similar discussion occurs in another group where the members discuss a quote about feeling Swedish or not. The students are eager to discuss whether it is good to try to be like Swedes and Dari finally concludes that “being like a Swede when you have a different background is like being a part-time Swede”.

Another subject in the novel that the students refer to is how the immigrants in the book become stereotypes. Many students present different quotes that illustrate how easy it is to generalise and categorise people.

Thus, a clear pattern emerges from the material where the form of reading is subject-oriented since the students share and compare their experiences from situations similar to those described in the book. The fact that the students dare and want to participate actively in the discussions is considered by Cummins (2000, 97) to be an approach to texts which is important in order to learn and develop the language. It also points towards Langer’s third stance; stepping back and rethinking what one knows (2005, 33). In this way we change focus, from developing the envisionment to reflecting upon what the ideas mean to our own lives.

What do the students mainly recognise? The book is set in a Swedish town and from time to time the students voiced that they recognised different places described in the book. The recognition was often clear and tangible, as illustrated by Dari when he understood that his own school was partly the setting for the book. He expresses that he greatly enjoys reading about a place he recognises. For Dari, who is one of the few students in the group who does not enjoy reading, the recognition factor is positive. The fact that he recognises the setting makes him both engaged and motivated to keep on reading, with his attention becoming sharpened and recognition a driving force of his reading.

When the students talk about Bahar’s identity conflict, recognition becomes more complicated. Tama states that she recognises the situation of the main character. Just like Bahar, Tama feels that she is between two cultures and that she has to understand and relate to both. She wants to be like ‘all the others, the crowd’, but also keep her own family satisfied. The recognition factor is important in the reading and reception as Tama’s expressions illustrate.

Meaning-oriented forms are rare in practice, even though they are occasionally possible to distinguish. The students refer to Shervin, Bahar’s younger brother, who needs help to find his identity. Alia describes him as a searching teenage rebel, and when he dyes his hair it turns orange instead of blond, which is what he wanted. The parents are upset and their son’s behaviour makes them wonder what mistakes they have made. Heelb states that the author’s message when describing Sharvin’s behaviour is that some teenagers will do anything to fit in, even if their behaviour is in defiance of their parents’ wishes.

Several discussions and student essays display a tangible frustration with the conditions in Swedish society, both for the students themselves and on a more
general level. Mohdi writes in an essay that, just like Bahar, the misunderstandings he has encountered are most often linked to his background. He feels that the media expects immigrants to talk about exclusion and other negative experiences that they may encounter. Mohdi writes:

Does she [Bahar] regard herself as a Swede or an immigrant? She regards herself as human being, no different from all other people on the globe who eat, drink, who have good intentions and who of course make mistakes like everybody else, not as Swedes or as immigrants – but like all other people (Mohdi’s essay).

Here it is possible to distinguish the forms of reading which I call society-oriented since the students use the text as a point of departure for highlighting and discussing different social problems. Apart from this, the students reveal a critical gaze on existing social structures. As an example, Diraf reflects in his essay on the general view in the novel about how immigrants often are badly treated in Sweden. He compares this with the current situation in Sweden as he writes how refugees, who have tried to fight for their own country, have lost all their belongings and when they finally arrive in Sweden “they lose the only thing they have left – their souls”.

These society-oriented forms are within the scope of Langer’s fourth stance; stepping out and objectifying the experience. Here the readers become aware of the tension between the author’s world and their own as well as about conflicts and power.

**Discussion**

In this article, I have investigated the ways in which students, in a certain context, interact with a modern Swedish novel and which readings they choose to make of the text, including how they respond to it and how they respond to each other in relation to the text.

The analyses show that the students are eager to talk about themes such as language, culture clashes and integration. Further, it is clear that they become involved in the reading of the text and in the discussions. That they themselves initiate themes indicates that the novel has had an impact on them. When the lesson was over, many students wanted to continue talking, subjects for discussion about events in the novel never ceased and many were eager to write. In this way, literature was utilised to encourage the active use and development of language in a meaningful context. In their book talks, the students discussed definitions of words and in the talks understanding was facilitated by words that were repeated and sentences were clarified. Bergman (2007) writes the following about language development:

By shifting the focus from language skills to language in use in a quest for knowledge, where the aim is to create meaning in relation to content, we can open up completely new
opportunities for the subject of Swedish, when it comes to both attaining knowledge and language development (2007, 333 my translation).

In my opinion, this notion could also be applied to the subject Swedish as a second language. According to Bradford, literature can contribute to the development of language skills at the same time as encouraging literary competence: “if literature is to provide a useful vehicle for the teaching of second language skills, it must first succeed as a literary experience” (2006, 203). If the aim is to give students a meaningful literary experience, the linguistic perspective should not be in the forefront but, by using language in discussions and writing about fiction, language skills are developed in a meaningful way. The linguistic and pragmatic ability (using language in a contextually appropriate fashion) together with aspects of identity and culture are in accordance with the syllabus of Swedish and Swedish as a second language. This is also in line with the critical language awareness Cummins advocates, where the focus is on the formal features of the target language combined with a critical exploration of language and power (2000, 101 ff). In my material, this is exemplified when the students discussed the form of language the author uses and the role of language in work opportunities when it comes to the novel’s characters.

The analysis reveals that the students have good reading abilities as they use different forms of reading and that they have the capacity to move in and out from what Langer calls different stances. These different stances make the readers ponder different aspects while developing an understanding of the text, the envisionments and life itself. The forms of reading that were most clearly discernible were primarily subject-oriented where the reader applies his or her own personal experiences to give meaning to the text. In addition, value-oriented (Tengberg 2011) forms were distinguished. Here the students’ authentic statements about the text are clarified or, as Tengberg writes: “These forms of reading demand something which the teacher, by definition, cannot be expected to know better than the students” (304, my translation). There was a bias towards the personal where the student’s own experiences and opinions were in focus, and where the literary text tended to disappear. Thus the text became some sort of starting point for intense conversations about the students’ own lives in Sweden. To recognise oneself in the text was important and often positive, not least for inexperienced readers such as Dari.

However, there were sequences when discussion of the text petered out into more general discussions of social problems, which I call society-oriented forms of reading. They resemble what Hultin (2006), based on analyses of conversational genres, calls “the discussion of culture and norms”. According to Hultin, the overall content of this type of discussion is that it prompts us to make comparisons between different cultural phenomena and problematise these, and this is often what the students did in their discussions in this study. These society-oriented forms differ from the value-oriented ones as they bring topics up to a more general level.
It is also possible to determine from the context of the study which forms of reading were left out. Forms which were not evident were meaning-oriented which, according to Tengberg, involve relating to aspects of the text that are not explicit (2011, 205). The metacognitive forms of reading (2011, 224), which are the most elusive and where students focus their attention on their own thinking during reading, could not be discerned at all. What is also missing is what Persson (2007) calls critical reading, which includes language, structure and literary devices. This is overlooked in the syllabus for Swedish as a second language where too little time is given to literary work. There are several aspects the students need to have mastered to become competent readers – that is to say, abilities to move in and out from texts as well as to understand how the text is constructed.

Apart from the need for more forms of reading and literary devices to be introduced, there is another aspect where the teacher’s intentions were not realised. What many of the students expressed was some kind of resistance, the novel did not give them anything ‘new’, so the choice of literature might need to be reconsidered. Recognition and identification gave rise to both conversation and discussion but, despite that, it felt almost too familiar or, as Tamar put it, “the subject of the novel is too well worn”. Annes thinks that the novel clearly shows the situation of immigrants and how they look at various aspects in the community, and she believes that there are other readers who might gain an insight into this existence. Many students are interested in reading something that allows them to go beyond their own frames of reference and find something unknown to them.

The students appreciated the working method which gave them freedom in a controlled form. They chose to comment and reflect on themes that were close to their own lives and were willing to involve themselves fully in the talks, using the text as a springboard. Cummins believes that interaction creates a feeling of empowerment (2001, 44) – when students voice their opinions they will be respected and acknowledged by each other and the teacher. This was happening in a classroom where interaction prevailed and the students were given opportunities to invest their identities. Besides Cummins, Bergman (2007), Gibbons (2005) and Dysthe (1996) advocate this method, “it is only when the dialogic function dominates that students get the opportunity to be meaningful individuals in interaction with each other and with the teacher” (Dysthe 1996, 226). This is also in line with Langer when she states: “Students are treated as thinkers, as if they can and do have interesting and cogent thoughts about the pieces they read, and also have questions they would like to discuss” (1992, 42).

Even if one cannot generalise the results from this qualitative study, it does shed light on how a group of students interact with a modern Swedish novel and with each other in relation to the text. One conclusion that may be drawn from this study is that the role of literature for personal and cognitive development and also language
development can be vital, as well as the knowledge of literature devices to become skilled readers.

Another conclusion is that second-language learners should not be left with one type of literature; instead, they should encounter a wide range of authors and themes, like all other students in school. However, this would require that fiction would be given more scope in the syllabus for Swedish as a second language or that students participate in the same course, Swedish as L1 and L2. Wiklund and Landmark write:

Judging by the national curriculum there seems to be two parallel Swedens: one national and ethnically homogeneous and one multicultural. The two Swedish subjects appear to represent these two parallels. We believe it would be more reasonable to face the fact: the entire Swedish school system is part of a multicultural society (2012, 150, my translation).

The novel *Call it Whatever the Hell You Like* could obviously be read by all students, regardless of their background. The topics of language, culture clashes, religion, integration and identity would be reignited through a discussion involving students with even more diverse backgrounds regarding ethnicity, class and gender. It could pave the way for what Persson calls *democratic literature teaching* with a challenging conflict discourse of conflict and perhaps, at best, it can also lead to consensus and understanding.

Finally, I highlight Nussbaum who embraces a classical idea of the *world citizen* and his or her loyalty to the people of the world. Something that can help us with this approach is, according to Nussbaum “... the ability to imagine what it would mean to be a person who is different than he himself is” (1997, 10). This should not be done uncritically, but by shifting perspectives and using our imagination we should be able to view other people’s life situations and actions. According to Nussbaum, the reading of fiction is particularly suited for this purpose. Although Nussbaum’s context is the American academic world, I think that her thoughts may well be applied when teaching literature to students in Swedish schools. In a democratic school, all students, regardless of their background, should be given the opportunity to gain access to a rich culture of reading and reflection with a diverse range of literature, which at best may create tolerance and understanding.

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Appendix

Appendix: The students

| Pseudonyms: | Sex: | Age: | Time in Sweden/years: | Place of birth: | Mother tongue (most often spoken at home): | Participate in course in mother tongue: |
|-------------|------|------|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Yasan       | M    | 18   | Three                | Norway, lived in Spain from age 3 to 12, parents from Iraq | Persian (farsi) | No |
| Masam       | M    | 18   | Ten                  | Iraq            | Arabic                        | No |
| Tama        | F    | 18   | Five                 | Iraq            | Arabic and Arameish           | Yes |
| Anaz        | F    | 18   | Eight                | Germany, parents from Kosovo | Albanian | No |
| Imo         | F    | 18   | Seven                | Japan. Lived for 5 years in Taiwan | Japanese/Swedish | No |
| Dari        | M    | 17   | Twelve               | Iraq            | Arabic                        | Yes |
| Annes       | F    | 18   | Born in Sweden       | Sweden, parents from Iraq | Arabic                     | No |
| Mhodi       | M    | 18   | Eleven               | Iraq            | Arabic                        | No |
| Dieh        | M    | 18   | Eight                | Iran            | Persian                       | No |
| Diraf       | M    | 18   | Twelve               | Iraq            | Arabic                        | No |
| Kaln        | F    | 18   | Born in Sweden       | Sweden, parents from Turkey | Turkish | No |
| Alia        | F    | 18   | Twelve               | Kurdistan       | Kurdish                       | Yes |
| Heelb       | M    | 17   | Fourteen             | Iraq            | Arabic                        | Yes |
| Faro        | M    | 18   | Four                 | Afghanistan     | Pashto                        | No |
| Yene        | F    | 18   | Born in Sweden       | Sweden, parents from Vietnam who moved to China then to Sweden | Cantonese | No |
| Hemed       | M    | 21   | Five                 | Iraq            | Arabic                        | Yes |