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A study on the use of fiction in the second language classroom

Linda Hägg

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Supervisors: Caroline Snäckestöm Sims M.A, Iulian Cananau PhD
Examiner: Marko Modiano PhD

**Abstract**

This study reports on the use and benefits of fiction as a method to teach English as a second language in primary school. The study was conducted by reading previous research and conducting one-on-one interviews with six active teachers. The teachers all taught English in first to third grade, and they all had received education for it. The interviews contained questions about the use of fiction in both English and Swedish education. The results show that the general idea of using fiction to teach English is positive; however, only one teacher used it in practice. The other teachers list films and speaking exercises as their main tools for teaching English. According to previous research and interviews, the results of using fiction are positive, as it enhances vocabulary, comprehension and pronunciation. It has been shown that reading fiction enhances vocabulary, as the children are interested in what they read and therefore learn more as it engages them.

**Keywords**: fiction, English, second language, reading, vocabulary, authentic texts.
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1. Introduction

To learn a new language, one must know how to express oneself in a social context. This is stated in the curriculum of the Swedish National Agency for Education, which will henceforth be called NAE (National Agency for Education 2011). According to the NAE, students must be given an opportunity to improve their communication skills:

Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop all-round communicative skills. These skills involve understanding spoken and written English, being able to formulate one’s thinking and interact with others in the spoken and written language, and the ability to adapt use of language to different situations, purposes and recipients. Communication skills also cover confidence in using the language and the ability to use different strategies to support communication and solve problems when language skills by themselves are not sufficient. (National Agency for Education 2011:30).

According to the NAE, schools are obligated to provide a wealth of opportunities for students to develop their language skills. The NAE states that, “[l]anguage, learning, and the development of a personal identity are all closely related” (National Agency for Education 2011:9). Furthermore, they state that: “[b]y providing a wealth of opportunities for discussion, reading and writing, all pupils should be able to develop their ability to communicate and thus enhance confidence in their own language abilities” (National Agency for Education 2011:9). In addition, the NAE finds it important for schools to stimulate students’ desire to learn a language (National Agency for Education 2011:30).

To provide this knowledge, schools must help students express their knowledge in different ways; students must try different forms of expression and experience different feelings. This can be done by using drama, rhythm, dance and music in addition to pictures and texts, because students are supposed to adapt the ability to create. Creating is very important in teaching younger students. Using creative
work and playing games is active learning. Active learning helps younger students adapt to knowledge. The NAE states that, “[c]reative activities and games are essential components of active learning. In the early years of schooling, play in particular is of great importance in helping pupils to acquire knowledge” (National Agency for Education 2011:9).

In connection with this, Sandström states in Kidworthy Works (2011) that children must connect with what they are learning if they are to own the subject and make it their own. Sandström believes that this is something that can only be done if the subject being read is interesting enough for children to get absorbed with it (Sandström 2011: 18-19). This is where fiction can play an important role, according to Sandström. She states that this connection can be made by using authentic texts and fiction. Authentic texts interest children and enrich their lives because they address themes that are important in life (Sandström 2011:20-21). In this study, all texts are referred to as fiction. The term fiction includes picture books and storybooks. Sandström means that these texts are key to language learning when it comes to younger children. She believes that such texts touches children’s’ souls and engage them in an active way. This increases their learning capacity and speed (Sandström 2011:20-21).

The NAE agrees with Sandström that fiction plays an important role in teaching children, as they identify literature as, “the carrier of experience, experiences such as excitement, humor, tragedy and joy” (Sandström 2011:21). It is also believed that literature and fiction help individuals understand the world around them. In addition, fiction works as a tool to develop feelings and attitudes, as it challenges judgments and enriches empathy. Sandström believes that fiction can be used in a foreign language as well. She claims that fiction can play a significant role in learning as the fiction bonds with children (Sandström 2011:21-22).

In addition to fiction, Sandström believes in using different methods when younger students are being taught a foreign language. To read fiction and then to engage in activities together in the classroom is an efficient way to teach and provide meaningful teaching moments (Sandström 2011: 23-24). Sandström finds that some studies reveal the benefits of fiction. They show that techniques like reading aloud and establishing a book talk, when used together with interactive teaching methods, can boost the quality of learning (Sandström 2011:21-22). All of this in in accordance with NAE, which states a school’s mission is to create a good environment for growth, development and teaching (National Agency for Education 2011:9-10).
1.2 Aim and research questions

In this work, an attempt will be made to analyze the use of fiction as a method for teaching English as a second language. The aim is to find out how six primary school teachers qualified to teach English use fiction in the classroom. The attempt is to find out if they use it to enrich the experiences their students have while learning a new language. In addition, there will be an attempt made to determine whether there are benefits to the use of fiction. In this essay there will be a focus on what effects fiction has on student comprehension and language skills.

The primary purpose of this essay is to answer the following research questions:

- Do teachers in this study use fiction when teaching English?
- Do teachers use authentic texts in their teaching?
- If they use fiction and authentic texts, at what level and how are these texts being used?
- What benefits might there be to using fiction in the English classroom?

The method used to answer the above questions involves interviewing six teachers.
2. Background

The NAE states that, “[l]anguage is the primary tool human beings use for thinking, communicating and learning” (National Agency for Education 2011:26). The English language surrounds us in everyday life and in education. Therefore, having a deep understanding and knowledge of English can increase the possibility of engaging in different social contexts. This is why education in English is so important in school and why it is the chosen topic for this work.

According to the NAE, students should be given opportunities to develop their language skills in a stimulating way during English education in primary school: “Teaching should encourage pupils to develop an interest in languages and culture, and convey the benefits of language skills and knowledge” (National Agency for Education 2011:26). They argue that communication and understanding are important. This is something Sandström agrees with, as she states that the four basics in languages skills are reading, writing, listening and speaking (Sandström 2011:27).

Katalin Lang also emphasizes the importance of understanding and connecting with what is read in her article, “The Role of Storybooks in Teaching English to Young Learners” (2009). In agreement with Sandström, she believes that fiction should be used as a source for learning English. Using fiction to teach a foreign language is not a new method: “The idea of using FL children’s books as a good starting point for early FL education is not original. For generations teachers around the world have relied on children’s books for language learning” (Sandström 2011:22). Sandström also believes that language is not the only benefit of using fiction: “And literature can be powerful in a foreign language, even for children” (Sandström 2011:22-23).

In addition to the above research, Lang claims that learning should be child-centered. In agreement with Sandström, she says it also must be experimental and socially interactive. Lang means that learning is more efficient when children are involved in social interactions. These interactions and activities should be meaningful and relevant to the children (Lang 2009:49-50): “Language should be used as a tool to do things which are relevant and meaningful to the child” (Lang 2009:50).
2.1 Previous research

The Swedish Education Administration states that a new language should be learned in a social context. This should be done using communication. In addition, it is important to understand how to learn a foreign language. If one understands how children learn a new language, one can find methods for teaching the younger students.

2.1.1 Learning a foreign language

The first theme to consider is how to learn a foreign language. Lang explains two different concepts in language learning: immersion programs and foreign-language programs (FL). In an immersion program, the language being taught is used broadly and thoroughly. Moreover, it is used in a social setting where the children can relate to it. When it comes to FL programs, the language being taught is used only in the classroom and is treated as a school subject. This means that it is not used in children’s everyday life (Lang 2009:49-50).

Learning a new language should be done early in life, as it has positive effects. Jeremy Harmer (2007) states this in his book, *The Practice of English Language Learning*. He means that children subconsciously learn languages as they are exposed to them in their environment. Harmer states that they are exposed even when they are not being taught. He continues to argue for early learning, stating that, as children grow older, they lose the instinctive ability to learn a language. Language acquisition also gets harder. On the other hand, children’s abstract cognitive ability increases as they get older. Their thinking evolves, and this makes them better learners; however, they lose the ability to respond to instinctive language learning (Harmer 2007: 82-84).

Harmer continues to describe different theories about how to teach English. First, he states that language is learned subconsciously mixed with grammar and vocabulary. Second, he states that the degree of acquisition is improved when a subject is taught outside the classroom, because a subject taught outside is taught in a subconscious way. It is also taught in an environment where the language is informal instead of in class (Harmer 2007:82-84).
2.1.2 Authentic texts as a tool for teaching English

A second theme found in using fiction to teach English is the use of authentic texts or fiction. Joanne Collie and Stephan Slater (1987) explain in their book, *Literature in the Language Classroom: a Resource Book of Ideas and Activities*, that authentic texts are texts that were not originally written for teaching (Collie and Slater 1987:3). In addition Sandström defines *authentic texts* as texts that interest and enrich children’s lives. She also defines *authentic texts* as texts that address themes in life that are important (Sandström 2011:20-21). Fiction texts are good examples of authentic texts; thus, authentic texts will be referred to as fiction in what follows. Harmer defines *authentic texts* as texts written in a native language. Harmer continues by arguing that, by reading authentic texts, students come in contact with “real” language. He believes that this is important, as real language is the language students encounter in their everyday lives (Harmer 2007: 273).

Using fiction is something that educators are eager to do, as Lang found in her studies. Moreover, she found that they are also eager to create activities. Reading fiction results in the students getting deeper understanding of both non-native and native languages. Lang also says that fiction increases children’s motivation to learn and gives them a good foundation of the language being read. Lang claims that this is because it stimulates their imagination and creativity. She reached these conclusions by analyzing projects to study the factors involved in teaching (Lang 2009:50-51).

The first project Lang studied was conducted by Nikolov in 1998. This project is a report on how young learners have been involved in developing a syllabus for English as a foreign language. The syllabus had a story-based approach. This project was conducted over an eight-year period. The participants were between the ages of 6-14. During this period, the students were only in contact with one teacher. The data Lang analyzed from this study were collected from self-reflection notes made by the teacher.

The other project Lang analyzed was conducted in 2003 by Lugossy/Nikolov. This project focuses on reading materials. It analyzes the benefits of using authentic texts as complementary materials for teaching English as a foreign language. This study was conducted over a two year period. The participants were
children between the ages 7-10. These children had no contact with English outside school. The teacher was given twenty-two different fiction books, and these books were used during the lesson. The children were allowed to bring the books home to re-read if they wanted to. The data was gathered through observations made by teachers and by observations of lesson made by an external person. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather results. In addition, teachers were asked to write diaries that Lugossy/Nikolov could analyze later. From these projects, Lang found that fiction is beneficial for foreign-language teaching (Lang 2009:52-53).

According to both Lang and Sandström, fiction should be used in English teaching. Sandström states that fiction should be used in conjunction with activities that are to be engaged in after reading the fiction. These activities can include songs and rhymes. She also states that the text itself is important in teaching English as a second language. The text must contain a structure and content that children can relate to, such as fiction. When children read something that they can connect to, they tend to learn more. When choosing fiction to read, it is important to consider children’s interests so that the book can keep them engaged. They must feel involved in the story. While reading the story, the reader must present the nuances of the language (Sandström 2011:22-23).

Sandström continues to recommend fiction as the main approach to teaching English as a foreign language. The main reason for this is that Sandström is very skeptical about the value of textbooks that are made for education: “I think that these textbooks are written from the perspective of what textbook writers assume language classes should cover in the first years” (Sandström, 2011:21). She is skeptical towards the language in these books because it is not the kind of language children use: “Why would we think kids want to use language they rarely hear in their first language?” (Sandström, 2011:21). Collie and Slater agrees with Sandström that fiction is the right approach. The fiction should be written for native-speaking students so that the foreign language students will become familiar with the native language. By way of fiction, children can become familiar with, “different linguistic uses, forms and conversations of the written mode” (Collie and Slater 1987:4).

Reading fiction leads to listening and additional benefits, according to Lang. When children listen to a storybook and look at the pictures, they become familiar with the language being read. They also become good at interpreting the pictures. Lang found that, by listening to a storybook, children can learn basic concepts
and facts about the world. We initially must understand how to read visually and decode the text. This is why fiction is beneficial. By reading fiction, children develop several thinking processes, such as observing and comparing. Lang claims that, by using pictures, children can have conversations about them and in this way develop their language skills. By having these conversations, they will increase their vocabulary and oral language. The main reason to use fiction is that it increases students’ motivation (Lang 2009:51-53). When Lang read the projects about teaching foreign language, she found the following reason to use fiction:

The richly illustrated authentic materials are themselves motivating for this age group, some of the tales are well-known in Hungarian as well, thus serving as a useful background knowledge for learners in the English lesson, vocabulary and language functions are presented in a meaningful context through stories, stories can be exploited by designing great variety of tasks around them, both active and passive skills are developed, Stories are excellent tools for cultural enrichment of FL teaching. (Lang, 2009:52)

Lang finds that children who have a more positive attitude towards the English language are much more successful in learning it. They also have more confidence (Lang 2009:51). This is a benefit of using fiction. Sandström argues that the benefits of reading fiction in the first language can be applied to second-language reading, as the amount of reading aloud effects the language development (Sandström, 2011:22). In addition, vocabulary acquisition is helped through storybook reading. The best effect is given when the text is re-read many times, as this has a positive influence on vocabulary (Sandström 2011:22).
2.1.3 The importance of a good book and ways of reading it

It is not only the content of a book that is important but also how it is read. When reading a book aloud, it is important to use the right melody and intonation. This is because the words get stuck with the children. During reading, they are exposed to the language. This increases the quality of the students’ prosody. Furthermore, it is important to explain some words briefly but memorably. This helps increase language acquisition. To memorably explain words, one can use tools during reading such as, “gestures, definitions, decontextualized statements, synonyms and pointing to illustrations” (Sandström 2011:25). As mentioned in the previous section, vocabulary is a benefit.

When reading to students, it is important to keep a flow with no interruption. This is done to keep the students engaged. It is also important to keep interruptions to a minimum, as some children cannot tolerate them. This is because interruptions can make some children drift away from the story. If interruptions are to occur, children must be prepared for them. This preparation allows the reader to answer questions that come along in the story. In addition, the reader must give the children key information about the story before reading. Information can be about words, character and plot. This information decreases questioning as well (Sandström 2011:41).

When they are read to, children subconsciously retain vocabulary. Barry Lee-Reynolds claims as much in his article, “A Mixed-Methods Approach to Investigation First- and Second-Language Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition through the Reading of Fiction” (2004). He means that children are taught vocabulary inside and outside of school as they are exposed to reading. Lee-Reynolds states that this occurs in both first and second language. Reading fiction can improve the second-language learners’ vocabulary. It can also give them a native-like vocabulary (Lee-Reynolds 2004:112). Reading is also considered to increase language development and literacy (Lee-Reynolds 2014:119-120).

A good book to read is a book that is in harmony with the needs of the children who are being read to, as Collie and Slater state (1987:5-6). This means, as Sandström explains, that one must find texts that are relevant to students. This is when fiction can be used (Sandström 2011:20). It is important to look at students’ needs,
interests, language level and cultural background when choosing a book to read. Collie and Slater continue by saying that children’s interest in a book is important, as interest is key to getting them engaged. Students engaged in the reading process learn more. Sandström claims that if children want to hear a book many times, it is a good book to use in education. This is because research shows that repetition of words enhances vocabulary. Therefore, a good book is one with repetitive patterns. Sandström states that, if the reader explains the words during the reading and discusses them, children are more likely to increase their vocabulary (Sandström 2011:59-60).

In addition, Collie and Slater state that the simpler and clearer the language in the book, the more the students can learn from it. They can also retain more knowledge. However, Collie and Slater agree with Sandström that the most important thing is the children’s interest in the book. If they have interest, they have a more positive experience: “Interest, appeal and relevance are all more important” (Collie and Slater 1987:6).

Fiction and authentic texts provide long-term benefits when the language sticks with the children. It might take some time for these benefits to show up, but when they do, they stick (Sandström 2011:105). This argument is also supported by Gun Lundberg in her book, The First Years of English (2011). She claims that English teaching is important for students and for their growth in language. Therefore, she believes that it is important that different methods are used with a focus on communication (Lundberg 2011:112).

2.1.4 Reading aloud with activities

Sandström argues that children must be engaged in the books they read when they are learning English as a second language. By this she means that they do not learn from just listening. They must have some activity around it to be engaged (Sandström 2011:23-24).

As mentioned before, children develop vocabulary when reading. But activities help them to become orally competent, Sandström says. Sandström suggests that teachers should use games that the children recognize together with the fiction. Teachers might have to adjust them so that they contain all the material and vocabulary
used and learned from fiction. This is so the children can establish the newly learned vocabulary into their memory. If a child works with something physical around words, it is more likely that he or she will remember it and use it in the future. For instance, children can draw and listen to increase the chance of retaining words. If they have colorful and strong illustrations in the book, it will help them. Another good activity is for children to read a book aloud for each other. This, however, requires that the book has been read a few times before so that they are familiar with it. Reading props such as puppets can be helpful in the reading process or as an activity afterwards. Singing is another activity that helps children remember English. Most people remember words that are written in a song (Sandström 2011:79).

Since children can become personally involved in what they are reading, activities provide a beneficial way to use fiction. There are many benefits to having activities to what you have read. According to Collie and Slater, fiction facilitates language learning because children get personally involved in the stories. By reading the story over and over again, children begin to “inhabit” the text and this makes it easier to build activities around the fiction (Collie and Slater 1987:8-9).

2.1.5 The value of asking questions during fiction reading

Another activity that is beneficial for second-language education is asking questions. Courtney B. Caszden states in “The Value of Conversation for Language Development and Reading Comprehension” (2004) that students’ learning abilities increase if language is involved in reading a book. Caszden analyzes her results based on a plenary talk from 2004 that was conducted by the Reading Recovery Teacher Leader Institute in Orlando and based on a meeting at Reading Recovery Teachers in Concord 2004. Results show that using the language while reading and talking about the book gives children a better understanding of the structure of a narrative text. In addition, students also reach a higher level of language skills. This is something all students can reach if they are asked questions during a book talk, according to Caszden. She continues by stating that is important to have open questions in a book talk. This is because there is always something to say about a book. Asking questions is an important factor in a
conversation. Asking questions increases the opportunity for better verbal communication (Caszden 2004:4)

The teacher has an important role when it comes to questioning during a book talk. Caszden states that the teacher has the important role to help students increase their verbal communication: “We have known for a long time that conversation with an adult was the best tutorial situation in which to raise the child’s functioning to a high level” (Cazden,2004,9:2). In accord with this, Aiden Chambers writes in his book, *Tell Me (Children, Reading and Talk) with the Reading Environment* (2014), of the importance of an adult supporter in a child’s reading process. Aidan Chambers also encourages book talk and asking questions about what has been read.

In addition to Caszden’s questioning, Chambers talks about the importance of talking about what you read. He does not believe that you know what you read until you have talked about it. Chambers does not talk about open-ended questions like Caszden. Chambers approach to questioning is similar to Caszden’s since the questions in a book talk are open-ended questions. These questions do not have an obvious answer as they vary between students. Having book talks on different levels can help children to increase their experiences of a book.

The teacher has the role of asking the right questions and this is important. To ask yes-and-no questions when talking about a book does not invite conversation. These questions are more likely to close an invitation for a conversation. If the teacher uses “open” questions instead, then he or she opens up a long conversation in which the students feel invited to talk. With open questions, students are given the opportunity to open up in a conversation. They open up because they cannot answer merely yes or no; for instance, they have to describe how a barracuda looks. This opens up the conversation and can lead to more questions (Caszden 2004:3). Similarly, Chambers states that questions are important as a way to start a conversation. He also feels that the most important thing is how one asks a question. If a child is asked why, he or she is not likely to answer, as this question is too big and has no specific answer. If they are asked tell-me questions—this is Chambers’ own question guide—they feel more invited to participate in a conversation (Chambers 2014).

Furthermore, Bridget A. Walsh and Pamela Blewitt claim in their article, “The Effect of Questioning Style during Storybook Reading on Novel Vocabulary Acquisition on Preschoolers” (2006), that reading to children benefits their language and literacy development. These results were found in the study they
conducted. Their aim was to find out how children acquire words when reading fiction. The study shows that children’s vocabulary expands when they are read too often. Moreover, previous studies show that, to retain new vocabulary, children are helped when they are encouraged to actively answer questions and discuss a book (Walsh, Blewitt 2006:273-274). The results imply that the type of questions asked do not matter when it comes to learning vocabulary. The children are asked either non-eliciting questions or eliciting questions. Eliciting questions are questions from the story being read. The children are expected to answer with words from the story: novel target words. For instance, if a child gets an eliciting question—such as what is this?—he or she is expected to answer with words from the story. Non-eliciting question are questions that are based on the story target words. However, the children must answer using specific words from the story. For instance, if they are asked a non-eliciting question—such as what color is the pagoda?—this is not necessary, even though the question asked uses vocabulary from the story. Once again, one benefit of reading and asking questions us that children learn new vocabulary. This appears to have a connection with the amount of reading the children are exposed to (Walsh and Blewitt 2006:275).

This study is conducted to compare questioning styles, non-eliciting and eliciting questions to find out which are more effective for children’s vocabulary learning. The results are analyzed by data collected from three storybook readings and three different question conditions: vocabulary-eliciting questions, non-eliciting questions and no questions. The participants in the study were 35 children at the age of 3. The participating children were randomly divided into one of three groups. After conducting the study, the children were given tests to determine the results: The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-III tests vocabulary comprehension; the New Word Production Test tests expressive vocabulary knowledge (i.e., the ability to use words contained in the storybooks); and the New Word Comprehension Test tests receptive vocabulary knowledge to determine the comprehension of the words used in the storybook (Walsh, Blewitt 2006:274-275). Using fiction with questions it is also shown that vocabulary is a benefit as in previous research section.

In agreement with previous research, Walsh and Blewitt state that actively engaging children is profitable for their learning. This can be done through discussions and questions during a book reading (Walsh and Blewitt 2006:274-275).
To sum up, the most beneficial outcome of using fiction in varied ways is the increase of students’ vocabulary. Vocabulary is listed as a benefit in all previous research. This is because research shows that reading aloud has a good effect on children’s vocabulary and language development. If teachers show explanatory pictures to children, the children’s vocabulary will increase. Fiction is a beneficial tool to when teaching a second language. Reading aloud has an effect on language proficiency. In addition, using interactive activities produces a positive outcome in learning English as a second language. The positive outcome can be powered by props, music and anything that will increase children’s interest. Learning English as a second language takes place both inside and outside of the classroom. Language is acquired subconsciously. In conclusion, fiction is an effective way to engage children in activities that improve their vocabulary, which is the main beneficial outcome of using fiction. For clarification language is acquired through reading and being read to as this takes place subconsciously. Learning a language is an active learning where the students’ work with the language such as the activities Sandström (2011) writes about.
3. Method

To answer the research question of this study, I interviewed six primary-school teachers. The method chosen depends on different factors, such as the purpose of the essay and the teacher’s education level. The teachers were chosen through purposive sampling. Participants were required to have an education in teaching English to the lower ages, and their schools were to be located in my district in the middle of Sweden. The interview method in this essay is qualitative research interview. This method is presented in Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkman’s book, *The Qualitative Research Interview* (2014). The interviews used qualitative criteria such as short interview questions and relatively long answers (Kvale and Brinkman 2014:85).

Structured interviews were used for this study. To prepare for the interviews, a script was made (see Appendix 1) where the research questions were assigned sub questions that were asked in an everyday language. This script was used during the interviews as a template so that the same questions could be asked in all the interviews. The questions used in the template were direct, open-ended and close-ended questions. Open-ended questions offer teachers an opportunity to answer more freely. In contrast, some questions were closed; they were designed to encourage the teachers to answer in a more focused way (Crane and Hannibal 2009:354). Direct questions were also used as were initial questions with secondary questions (Kvale and Brinkman 2014:176).

The interviews were conducted in Swedish and then translated into English. This is because the teachers were more comfortable expressing themselves in their native language. I did not want the language to be a barrier for the interviews or to have an effect on the outcome.

The interviews were recorded and translated. After this, they were transcribed into writing to be analyzed. The analyses were conducted by reading and re-reading the transcript to analyze them (Crane and Hannibal 2009:358). After analyzing the transcripts, main themes were identified. This was done to categorize the transcripts into different themes as a way to identify answers to the research questions. In the end, the themes were summarized into structured tables to illustrate each theme (Crane and Hannibal 2009:360-362).

The semi-structured interview is good for acquiring data, as the interviewer can ask an interviewed person to elaborate his or her answers. The
interviewed person is then less biased by the interviewers’ preconceptions. Moreover, it allows for flexibility with regard to an open-ended approach. In addition, it allows the data to be analyzed in a variety of ways. The guide allowed the researcher to find themes more easily (Crane and Hannibal 2009:360-362). However, there are a few limitations to be aware of with this interview method. First, the data analysis is very time-consuming. Second, the interview situation can be artificial. This artificiality might bring up issues regarding the validity of the interviews and the interviewer’s biases (Crane and Hannibal 2009:345).

The ethical considerations made in this qualitative research include informant consent and the right to withdraw. The integrity and privacy of the teachers were also respected. The teachers are kept anonymous: no personal information about them will be given in this study (Crane and Hannibal 2009:347). None of the participants were harmed in any physical or emotional way. The teachers were informed and aware that the interviews were voluntary. They were also given sufficient information about this study before the interviews began. The teachers were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix 2) before the interviews.
4. Presentation of data/investigation

Six teachers participated in this study. They all teach English in the 1st through 4th grades.

Figure 1

*Teacher one* works in the second grade and has 20 years of experience. This teacher works at a school in a medium-sized neighborhood with approximately 300 students. English education at the university is for first through seventh grade teachers. *Teacher two* works in the third grade and has 15 years of experience. This teacher works in a school in the countryside with approximately 100 students. This teacher has had some English education at university. The teacher’s first education opportunity was not good. But when she started working, she was offered the opportunity to attend a 7.5 course, and that was better.

*Teacher three* works in the fourth grade but is educated for first through third grade and has had three years of experience. This teacher works at a school in the countryside with approximately 150 students. English education at the teacher’s university was good. She felt they covered the basics of English education.

*Teacher four* works in the second grade and has two years of experience. This teacher works at a school in a medium-sized neighborhood with approximately 300 students. This teacher feels that English education at the university was about teaching the teacher English with no didactics.

*Teacher five* works in the first, second, and sixth grade and has eight years of experience. This teacher works at a school in the countryside with approximately 100 students. The teacher’s education at university involved a lot of grammar, but it also involved creative ideas about teaching younger students.

*Teacher six* works in third grade and has had 15 years of experience. This teacher works at a school in the countryside with approximately 150 students. English education at this teacher’s university emphasized grammar aimed at the teachers but included some didactics.
As the chart shows, above only one of six teachers use fiction to teach English, though five of them have tried it at one time. Five of the teachers are familiar with the research regarding the use of fiction in class. Even though they are familiar with the research, some were doubtful about the positive effects of reading fiction. The teachers that expressed doubt about this are afraid that the students will not understand the fiction being read and that they will therefore acquire a negative attitude towards the English language and toward education in English. The teachers feel that some students are frustrated when they do not understand everything at once. Some students want to get the meaning of every word and feel frustrated if they do not. This then can prevent them from continuing to learn, as they get stuck with words and cannot continue. The one teacher who uses fiction did not express such concerns. All six teachers agree that the content of the text read is important. This is why they are positive towards fiction even if they do not use it for English.
As the chart above shows, four teachers used textbooks in their teaching often or sometimes. They use textbooks in combination with other texts, such as lyrics, instructions and phrases. The majority of the teachers use other texts more than textbooks or fiction.

The general attitude towards textbooks is not positive. One teacher finds them to be “disconnecting”: i.e., they do not address relevant themes for children. Textbooks are often divided into chapters such that the texts have no connection to each other. This division creates an obstacle to using the material to teach younger students. Two of the teachers complained that textbooks are somewhat restricted in the meaning you have to follow them chapter by chapter. The interviewed teachers felt this to be a hard way to work and therefore did not use them. This makes it hard to work with anything else in the English classroom, as time is limited. Two teachers feel that some parts of textbooks are useful.
The general tools used to teach English as a second language involve using films/movies that are mostly series. In addition, speaking exercises are a common tool.

Reading a text occurred occasionally in education, such as one or two times only. Vocabulary and translation are frequently used in English education. Teachers use these two, vocabulary and translation, by reading a textbook, text or lyric and then translating them. Teaching vocabulary occurs when working with a specific topic or area. In this topic, the students learn words associated with a certain theme such as colors or the body. When the students work with the body, they retain vocabulary regarding body parts. These words were translated into Swedish.

Films and short movies are often watched by all teachers. They watch pedagogical shows that are made for learning English. The teachers do not have enough time to work with the show afterward, as their lessons are too short. They have to continue the week after. This is a problem for some students, as they forget what they have seen. In addition, the teachers expressed positive ideas about these shows. They really make the students engaged.

Fiction is used by only one teacher on a regular basis. Another teacher tried it only once. When fiction is used, the focus is on vocabulary and translation, though one teacher uses it as a part of her education. This teacher uses fiction as a tool and does not translate unless it is necessary. One teacher uses YouTube to share stories.
with the children: i.e., the stories being read to the students. This teacher also uses Unite for Literacy, which is an online library that allows students to read fiction online.
The chart above shows that all teachers use fiction to teach Swedish. When fiction is used, the focus is on reading comprehension. In Swedish education, book talks occur at the same level as textbooks. Book talks are a way to increase reading comprehension using questions. Results show that teachers are more positive towards using fiction in Swedish education to practice reading comprehension. The general picture from the interviews is that fiction is more positively used for Swedish than for English, as only one teacher uses it in English class. None of the other five teachers make any connection between using fiction in English and Swedish. The teachers are more careful about using fiction to teach a second language because they are afraid that students will not understand fiction in English. If they use English fiction, they feel the need to translate so that students understand. The teachers’ preference to translate is shown in the previous Figure 3.

All teachers find content to be important in a text whether it is in Swedish or English. Four teachers indicated that fiction has a better content than textbooks, as it was easier for the students to connect with. In addition, students also show more interest in fiction than in textbooks. Two teachers believe there is no difference between fiction and textbooks. All teachers express thoughts about the importance of reading fiction. However, this is in Swedish-language education, as they feel that English might be too hard for students at this young age. Reading in the Swedish education teaches students
reading comprehension, but five teachers do not see a connection that this might be beneficial in English education as well. Teachers felt this as they had a fear of students not understanding and therefore having to translate the whole book. This would not be beneficial for learning English according to previous research.
5. Analysis of result, discussion

5.1 Use of fiction in the English classroom

The general answer if teachers use fiction in English education is no. This since only one teacher uses fiction as a part of the education. This result is based on the interviews that were conducted for this study, according to which one out of six teachers use fiction on a regular basis. The other five teachers have tried it one time but do not apply it in their education. These five teachers are positive towards using fiction; however, only one teacher uses it on a regular basis for fear of losing students in the reading process. One teacher feels that it might be too hard for students to understand. Some teachers explain that their students would get caught in not understanding. If the students were being read to, some of them might get stuck on words they do not understand and fail to move on from there. This opinion disagrees with the research by Sandström, which finds that fiction is beneficial as a tool to teach English. Using fiction as a tool supports student learning as, the language is more natural. The benefits of using fiction include increasing language, cognitive and personal development. Given previous research, one might argue that students will not get caught not understanding if they are read to at an early age. If language learning starts at an early age using this approach, it would be a natural way for children to learn. This means that they will not have to struggle with getting stuck on words. Another beneficial outcome is that when children listen to a story in a second language they are exposed to the language. For this reason, they are receptive to the language and their vocabulary will increase (Lang 2009).

One main reason teachers do not use fiction for teaching English is lack of education. They do not know how to use it. Teacher number two expressed a lack of knowledge about how to work with fiction. Teacher number five wants concrete methods for how to use it. Teacher five occasionally uses fiction to teach Swedish. So the understanding of fiction is there, yet the teacher does not make a connection between using it in a similar way to teach English.

The general picture from the interviews is a positive feeling towards fiction in English. Five teachers claim that their students like English fiction and get excited when reading it. Given these results, one can ask if the general neglect of fiction
lies with the teacher and their fear of not knowing how to use fiction. The results are interesting because the teachers are positive towards fiction but only one uses it.

Analyzing data on the use of fiction in first and second language education teachers was more likely to use fiction in the first language education. One of the benefits of using fiction is that it increases vocabulary. However, only one teacher uses fiction and considers this to be a benefit. Most of the teachers use book talks in their Swedish lessons. This use indicates a positive attitude towards fiction in the classroom in both Swedish and English. However, only one uses fiction in English, and four teachers use it in Swedish often or occasionally. All teachers are positive about using fiction in Swedish, but only two are positive about using it in English. Fiction is not looked down on; however, it seems to be more positively used in Swedish. The reason for this, as I found from the interviews, is that teachers do not feel experienced enough and worry that fiction might be too hard in English. If fiction feels too hard for the students, the teachers fear that they might lose interest in English altogether.

The teachers are more likely to use fiction in Swedish than in English. In Swedish they use fiction to teach students reading and vocabulary. Teachers use reading aloud very frequently in the Swedish classroom. This is because they find it important for children to hear how one reads. In this way, teachers believe that children are given a creative, analytical and comparing mindset. Another benefit of reading aloud is that it allows students to become familiar with the Swedish vocabulary and to hear pronunciation. One teacher reports this result in English as well. This is when her students read texts: specifically, song lyrics. The teacher lets the students highlight words they do not understand. They first get to highlight when reading quietly to themselves. After this, she reads the lyrics aloud and asks them to highlight again. She finds when she reads the text aloud for the students to hear that they understood more words than they do when reading it themselves. This agrees with Sandström’s findings: activities such as those discussed above expose children to nuances of language.

All six teachers agree that the content of a text is important. They find this to be one of the most important characteristics in both Swedish and English. However, they are more likely to use fiction in Swedish. This is in agreement with Sandström, Lang, Collie and Slater, and Chambers. They all believe fiction is a part of creating feelings in readers. Moreover, fiction allows a reader to use creativity and develop cognitive ability. These factors then increase children’s language. All teachers find the content of the text important. This as children learns when it interests them but they
only used this approach when it came to TV series and shows instead of fiction. Caszden states that talking increases a student’s vocabulary. All the teachers find vocabulary important. They could get vocabulary from fiction, according to Sandström and Lang. However, the vocabulary that is used in these teachers’ classrooms is mostly connected to short texts, films or words from a theme. Themes may include body parts or colors and then the words regarding this theme were used in the education.

Teaching English fiction is not the main tool used by the teachers. They prefer to use tools such as electronic devices, web-based material like games, and series. The most frequently used tool is speaking exercises and phrases. This agrees with Caszden’s statement that repetition of phrases is a good way to learn a language. The teachers use many repetitive phrases but not phrases from fiction. The teachers use alternative texts instead, such as texts from textbooks. They do not use entire textbooks, as most teachers feel textbooks to be somewhat “trapping”. This means, as two of the teachers describe, they feel textbooks to be something that must be used from the first to the last chapter. Teachers generally do not feel comfortable with this. Lyrics constitute another alternative sort of text that is used by teachers. Teachers use mostly modern songs played on the radio today. Teachers say that they use them because they speak to the children. Teacher two said that, “I feel you must take inspiration from what is around the children and take the chance to use it.”

According to the teachers, the most important thing in second-language learning seems to be speaking. This is an important skill to have in addition to reading. As the teachers find speaking to be most important, they might benefit from using fiction and having book talks around them even in English. This study did not determine how effectively students learn vocabulary.

5.2 Authentic texts used in teaching

Authentic texts are texts that were not made for teaching (Collie and Slater 1987). In addition, these are texts that touch souls and address important themes in life (Sandström 2011). Most of the teachers have used this kind of text. Most teachers have used lyrics, as these texts have a deeper meaning and usually address a theme. However,
if we focus on fiction, the results are different, as only one teacher uses authentic texts in her English classroom. Most teachers do not use fiction in their English classroom.

One teacher used digital books on YouTube with her students so that they could “watch” stories. The stories were recorded and read aloud for the children so they could hear the pronunciation of words. This teacher also used the “Unite for literacy” library: a website where children can read and listen to stories. Sandström emphasizes the importance of reading aloud, as it allows children to hear the melody and intonation of the language. In contrast, Chambers argues that a person who reads aloud interprets the text for the listener. This is not something for which one aims when it comes to language learning the focus is on learning the language and on engaging children in the story.

Only one teacher uses an online library to read fiction. She finds that her students’ vocabulary improves when they read or listen to fiction because the texts interest the students such that they want to learn: “I think since they like to read they want to learn more and I think that is beneficial and I feel they learn many English by reading and listening to books” (Interview with teacher six). She continues: “As long as you have the students with you, interested and eager to learn you have a good starting point. And fiction is books that speak to them in a different way since it is easier for the students to connect with the content. And when they do they learn the language.”

Teacher five finds that using fiction in Swedish increases students’ vocabulary. Though she does not use fiction in English, she is positive that it would have the same effect in English. In the Swedish lessons, there are no talks about using lyrics or other material besides fiction. Fiction is also considered too hard for use in English according to two teachers. They are concerned that the gap between phrases and reading fiction might be too large.

As stated above, all teachers find the meaning in a text important so that the children feel interested and can learn. However, most teachers use authentic texts only occasionally and use textbooks more often even though they argue that the content in fiction is better. This is in comparison with only one teacher who uses fiction all the time in the English classroom. No teacher uses complete textbooks, as they are described as unstructured and out of context. Teacher one does not use a textbook to avoid being ruled by them.

Another common idea about textbooks is that they are boring. However, none of the teachers rule them out completely, as they find them to have some good
texts that can be used occasionally. They use texts that are relevant to the current theme they work with in class.

Another reason for not using textbooks is resistance from students. One teacher has felt this in her class when students started to sigh at the sight of a book. This agrees with Lundeberg’s statement that textbooks are used at the expense of students as they decrease their motivation. Teachers who feel insecure are more likely to use textbooks than confident teachers. This might be why the interviewed teachers do not use textbooks to a greater extent than fiction. During the interviews, four teachers expressed a lack of knowledge about using fiction in the second-language classroom. The interviewed teachers expressed concerns about using fiction with comments such as the following: “I am sure it is if you know how to use it and to be honest I don’t really feel like I do so I don’t want to use it then.” This comment was made by teacher one. This teacher says that fiction can be used positively if one knows how to use it. Teacher four continues: “If I use material I want to be sure of it myself.” Another reason for not using fiction is that teachers do not have time to be sure of the material all the time. However, Lang, Sandström, and Lundberg claim that teaching a second language requires variated methods and reading material. In addition, one main reason for not using fiction is the minimal supply of English fiction in the school. This makes it hard to find good, interesting books for the students to read. Moreover, the fiction that can be found in the school is more suitable for older students than younger ones.

5.3 Methods using fiction in the English classroom

When the interviewed teachers tried to use fiction on one occasion, teacher one and two read aloud for their students. After reading, they talked about words that occur in the book. The book they chose to read is a repetitive one, as repetition increases students’ chances to expand vocabulary. Teacher one chose an easy book so that students would really understand the story and follow it. She believes that it is easier for students to understand if they can recognize what they read. In addition, teacher one states that the students love to work with fiction in Swedish education. She believes it would be the same in English. She believes a good story is always appreciated no matter what
language. Teacher two uses famous fiction that is recognized by students in Swedish in her attempt to use fiction in English education. She chooses famous books as she wanted students to recognize it. She believed this would make it easier reading in a foreign language. This teacher has tried to use fiction in the second grade, but in her opinion, second-graders are too young to understand.

Five teachers experience a lack of knowledge when it comes to using fiction in the second language classroom. When they do use it, they read aloud and talk about words in the text. The one teacher who used fiction on a regular basis also read to her students. In addition, she let the students’ read to themselves and to each other. They could choose between reading and listening to the story. Furthermore, she also let students work in pairs. Students listen to a story and later on read the story to each other. It is important to hear the sounds of the language and then practice pronouncing it oneself, this teacher believes. The teacher finds that students are eager to share what they have read. Through this they also practice speaking as they use words to describe the book they read. This teacher uses Sandström’s method when she reads aloud. She agrees with Sandström that it is beneficial. However, besides vocabulary training, the teacher does not include any activities directly related to the text being read. One can wonder if this has something to do with a lack of ideas for activities, time or knowledge. Teacher six uses fiction on a regular basis. Teacher six uses an online library where the text is read aloud to the students. They can follow by reading at the same time to practice pronunciation. This teacher also allows her students to work in pairs and read the text to each other after they hear it. The books in the Unite for Literacy Library are easy fiction books that are written in English. The language is manageable. In addition, one may choose different levels of books, from words to short sentences such as, “I see a cactus” or “How many friends play football?” The books are also illustrated with expressive pictures that match the text. This is something that teacher six finds very beneficial, as the students are eager to talk to each other about what they have read.

It takes time to see visible results from using fiction in the English classroom. But when it becomes visible, it shows progress in students’ language and vocabulary development. Not seeing the results right away might be one reason teachers choose not to use fiction. They do not see the future result as they only see the struggling students during reading and then decide to quit using fiction. This is something that the teachers discussed a lot during the interviews.
As stated above, teachers complain that they lack knowledge regarding the use of fiction in the second-language classroom. They claim that this is the main reason they do not use it. Teachers want more training in this area even though most of them are familiar with the research regarding fiction in English education. Only a few of the teachers in this study have received some sort of education about fiction during their time at the university. The results of the interviews show that teachers are eager to learn more about fiction and how to use it. They want more concrete tools for using fiction. They want to know how to work with fiction in the second-language classroom in a beneficial way.

5.4 Conclusion

There are several advantages to using fiction in the English classroom. Most of them refer to vocabulary and language development. In addition, Sandström states that fiction addresses the challenge of second-language learning. Because fiction speaks to children, and because they find it interesting to listen to, they pay attention. Moreover, fiction gives children a chance to hear the nuances of the language the story is being read in. In addition, Lang considers fiction an advantage in second-language learning. She claims that when children listen to a storybook and look at the illustrations, they become experts in the language in which the book is written. More benefits from using fiction include the conversation that occurs when children look at the pictures. This develops vocabulary and verbal language. Furthermore, children become familiar with the melody and intonation of the language. The teacher has an opportunity to explain difficult words as the story is being read. Lee-Reynolds finds that reading fiction gives children a native-like vocabulary and improved language skills. In addition, Caszden and Walsh and Blewitt find that the advantages of asking questions during a discussion of a text include vocabulary and language development, as the students tend to get involved in the discussions of a book.

To sum up, the benefits of using fiction include increasing vocabulary, language proficiency and understanding. Fiction allows children to learn through something that is familiar to them. It also teaches them new things, of which language
development is most important. Teacher six finds the same results in her students when she uses fiction: “I think they get good vocabulary by reading a lot, since they can listen to the books, they get a good pronunciation. I can notice an evolvement from when we started third grade until now; they have more vocabulary and they try to use English more and they want to know more words and phrases.” Other teachers do not find these results when it comes to fiction. However, they find these benefits upon practicing communication in class.

When teaching Swedish, most teachers use fiction as a tool. As stated before, most teachers are positive about fiction. Teacher four states that she prefers fiction literature, as it engages children more in reading and reading comprehension. She claims that if students are given a reading comprehension book, they feel it is a chore. However, if the teacher reads fiction and then talks about it, the students feel that it engages them more. Teacher three believes that it is possible to practice comprehension using book talk. Teacher six uses book talks significantly more than she uses reading comprehension books. She uses Chamber’s method for book talks. What is common with all teachers is that their students have personal books to read to themselves. In Swedish education, fiction is a very natural and important part. All teachers believe fiction to be important, but when it comes to English, they express a lack of knowledge in the area. For this reason, they have a fear of losing students. They fear that the students will hate English because it is too hard.

This result is interesting, because the thought with which this diploma work began is that more teachers would be using fiction. It is surprising to realize that only one of six teachers uses fiction frequently, especially since all of them are aware of the research around fiction and the benefits of using it. All teachers have tried to use it on at least one occasion; yet the opinions about outcome are divided among the teachers. Some find it too hard for the students and some feel a resistance from the students. The teachers feel that the students do not understand. According to one teacher, her students are eager and exited to read a book in English, but when they open it and start to read they become disappointed because they do not understand everything. Then they do not read fiction anymore. This is interesting, as the results suggest that using fiction takes some time to show. If teachers are aware of this, they might use fiction with more confidence.

Finally, I would like to say, based on interviews and research that the key to success is to learn from inside you. This is why we should use fiction to teach
English. Fiction can help students on their journey to master the English language. Further research in this area is needed to find the importance of using series and films instead of or together with fiction, because teachers seem more comfortable using films over fiction.
6. Bibliography


Chambers, Aidan (2014). *Tell me (children, reading and talk) with the reading environment*. [Ny utg.] Stockholm: Gilla böcker


## Appendix 1: Interview questions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Do the teachers concerned in this study use fiction when teaching English?</strong></td>
<td>What grades do you teach English in?</td>
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<td>How was your perception of English during your own school time?</td>
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<td>How was your English education at the university?</td>
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<td>How long have you been working as a teacher?</td>
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<td>What method do you use when teaching English?</td>
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<td>How do you plan your English teaching with regards to material, activities and language use?</td>
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<td>Do you use textbooks or fiction? Or no books at all?</td>
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<td>Do you use book talks in your Swedish education?</td>
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<td>When teaching Swedish do you use textbooks or non-fiction books?</td>
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<td><strong>Do teachers use authentic texts in their teaching?</strong></td>
<td>Do you believe that the content of the text is important in teaching English?</td>
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<td><strong>If they use fiction and authentic texts how do they use it?</strong></td>
<td>Do you believe that the content of the text is important in teaching Swedish?</td>
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<td>What sort of reading material do you use when teaching English? (if any)</td>
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<td>Do you use fiction teaching English? Why or why not?</td>
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<td>Have you ever tried using fiction as a tool for teaching English?</td>
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<td><strong>What benefits could there be in using fiction in the English classroom?</strong></td>
<td>Does meaningful conversation occur in your classroom? (Does the student’s speak English freely in the classroom?)</td>
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<td>How does the student’s evolve using the teaching approach used in your classroom?</td>
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<td>Does this method help struggling students?</td>
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<td>Are you familiar with the research and use of fiction as a means to teach English?</td>
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<td>Researchers argue that using authentic texts and fiction is a beneficial way to teach English as a second language, do you agree?</td>
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Appendix 2: Letter of consent

Participation in diploma work for teachers F-3 English Didactics.

The following interview will be recorded and used in this diploma work. Your integrity and privacy will be respected and for this reason your name and the school you work at will be kept anonymous. The interview will be transcribed directly to what you state in this interview and you have the right to withdraw statements. The participation is voluntary therefor you have the right to withdraw.

I agree to the terms above:

Date:_______________________________________________________

Signature:_________________________________________________