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Pushing Literacy Forward

How to Use the Novel *Push* in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

This is an essay in the field of English literature didactics. It argues for the use of authentic texts in literacy acquisition. Specifically, the aim of this essay is to justify the use of the novel *Push* in an English language classroom in Sweden by presenting a literature lesson plan and validating it by three interview responses from teachers at a senior high school. I believe students may find the theme of the novel engaging and motivating. The lesson plan is outlined as a student writing project. In this writing project, students will practice reading, speaking and writing skills. The project also includes peer- response which is an activity mentioned in the English 5 syllabus. The lesson plan aims to achieve the learning outcomes of what the Swedish curriculum and syllabus state. The project is validated by a questionnaire, sent by e-mail to teachers at a senior high school in Gävle, regarding the relevance of the proposed lesson plan. Since only three teachers found it possible to participate this essay should be considerate as a pilot case study. However their answers and my analysis provide practical teaching guidelines and indicate the relevance of this particular lesson plan.

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1. Introduction

In today's society the ability to read and write well is of great importance. People use their ability to read in several areas. It is important to be able to read when searching for information of different kinds, for example, when one is looking for information in a guidebook, or one needs to read the manual on how to put an IKEA bookcase together. Another occasion can be when one is on the computer and 'googling' on the Internet. The academic way of reading is however different and particularly important for the students' development in all school subjects. In school, students will learn to read in different ways for different purposes. One can read to gain general understanding of a text by skimming, or one can read a text closely with a critical eye to search for specific information. One can also read a text for pleasure. A novel or poems are for many people a good way to relax. There are many reasons why people read and it is in school where students can develop their individual reading skills. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be competent when teaching language studies and literature studies.

Moreover the ability to read actively is very important since it is the foundation for the expansion of knowledge in many areas. Consequently, reading skills and literature studies have been a core part of school education throughout the years. In Sweden, English language studies usually starts during the third school year. When children learn to read they are often exposed to prescribed books, which are written for the purpose of learning language. These prescribed books provide structure and appear reader friendly since they are designed in a comprehensible way; on the other hand, there is a lack of authenticity in prescribed books.

Authentic books and texts are not written for the purpose of language learning. Authentic texts can be, for example, a fictional novel, a text from a newspaper or a poem. There are several reasons for using authentic texts in the language classroom. Books describing real life situations for teenagers can inspire students because it is certainly easier for them to relate to circumstances similar to their own experiences and feelings.

At senior high school¹ students will develop several language skills. Their vocabulary will improve by reading authentic texts with a rich and expressive language. The

¹ Comparable to the upper secondary school

teaching of literature as well provides for the understanding of other people. By studying literature students learn more about history, economics and social conditions in their own and other cultures. Rosenblatt states “through the medium of literature we participate in imaginary situations, we look on at characters living through crises, we explore ourselves and the world around us” (Rosenblatt 1995:37). Literature studies can as well motivate students and they may find greater enthusiasm by reading authentic texts close to their own experience and reality.

1.2 Aim

In the context of the above introductory remarks, the aim of this essay is to justify the use of the novel *Push* in an English language classroom in Sweden by presenting a literature lesson plan and validating it by the interview responses from teachers at a senior high school.

Teenagers at senior high school are youths who are becoming adults, hence reading and discussing American poet and writer Sapphire’s novel *Push* can be a good book choice since it raises several existential questions that are relevant to teenagers. *Push* is a novel which is a contemporary work with a heartbreaking and difficult subject matter. *Push* is a dark story of a young woman’s almost unreal life with one misfortune after another. One may find it hard to relate to because of its brutally harsh story line. Still the power to survive and manage is very inspiring. Many teenagers have their own demons and problems and even if their problems cannot be compared to the novel’s main character Precious’s problems the challenges and anxieties described in the novel surely are recognizable among students.

This essay intends to include a didactic element to the discussion of authentic texts hence the feedback from the interviewed teachers becomes an added dimension to this essay. The feedback from the interviewed teachers gives an indication to the relevance of authentic texts and the use of *Push* in the English language classroom. The confirmation which is given by the interviewed teachers acknowledges the use of authentic texts. However, the novel *Push*, with its dark and many difficult topics, may be questioned by some regarding its use at the senior high school level.

1.3 Background/Method/Participants- the questionnaire

I sent out questionnaires as an e-mail. In this e-mail there was a presentation of the novel *Push*, background and aim of a proposed lesson assignment. The questionnaire was attached as files in the mail (see appendices 1, 2, 3, 4). The participants of the questionnaire were teachers from a senior high school in a city in Sweden. This e-mail was sent to thirteen English language teachers at the same school. However, only three found it possible to participate in the interview through mail. They have worked as teachers 3, 5 and 10 years respectively. Because only three teachers participated in the study, this essay should be considered as a pilot case study. Concerning the participants, my intention was to use teachers that have different experiences when it comes to teaching English and who have taught English over different periods of time, some more experienced than others, because this would give the survey a broader perspective.

1.4 Structure

This essay is divided into four sections. First a background presenting what is stated in the Swedish curriculum and a syllabus concerning literature is described, followed by a presentation of the novel *Push* and why *Push* is well-suited to instruction in the language classroom. Secondly, there is a section presenting how to work with *Push* in the language classroom. Thirdly, a discussion concerning the result of the questionnaire is held. Lastly, there is a conclusion of the essay.

2. Background

2.1 The Swedish Curriculum and Syllabi concerning literature in the language classroom

The Swedish government establishes state curricula and syllabi, which contain aims for each school subject. The idea is for schools to follow these provided directives for equality in education throughout the nation. Two syllabi will be discussed here since the government has decided to revise the Swedish syllabi. From autumn 2011, a new syllabus called Gy11 started to apply. Curriculum Lpf94 will continue to apply in all senior high schools in Sweden for students who started studying English before autumn 2011. This section will focus on what the curriculum and syllabi for the non-

compulsory school system and consider the use of literature in the English language classroom.

The Swedish curriculum Lpf94 mainly describes fundamental values and tasks of the school as well as provides goals and guidelines for teachers and school principals. The curriculum outlines how literature should be a part of the Swedish school system. In the curriculum Lpf94, under the rubric *The teacher shall* it states: “make sure that pupils acquire knowledge of books and libraries” (Lpf94:13). This is not very specific; still it implies the students’ right to be introduced to literature. Under the section *Goals to attain* it states: “can use specialist literature, fiction, and other forms of culture as a source of knowledge, insight and joy” (Lpf94:11). The study of literature is important and therefore even mentioned in the Swedish curriculum, it provides for the importance of giving students general knowledge of literature. As stated in the curriculum Lpf94, literature is an important part of the language classroom and the Swedish school system. The syllabus Lpf94 only focuses on the English course and all courses A, B and C each has their own syllabus. Comparable to the curriculum, which provides for guidelines for all school employers and school activity, the syllabus provides for the content of each subject. Each syllabus contains goals for students to attain and grading criteria. In the syllabus Lpf94 for English at the senior high school it states that by the A course the students should “be able to read and understand easy accessible novels and through literature acquire knowledge about cultural traditions in English speaking countries” (my translation).² By the B course, the students should “be able to read, summarize and comment on the content of longer fictional texts” (my translation).³ The use of literature is also stated in the C course, a student should “be able to read fictional novels from different epochs and different genres as well as be able to reflect on the texts’ content and form from different perspectives” (my translation).⁴ These statements give more direction than the one in the curriculum. At the A level, the students should learn about other cultures by reading novels. At the B level, the focus is more on students’ ability to analyze; and at the C level, students shall be able to analyze different kinds of texts from different epochs. There is a clear progression from focusing on reading and

² ”Kunna läsa och förstå tillgänglig skönlitteratur och genom litteraturen förvärva kunskaper om kulturtraditioner i engelskspråkiga länder”.

³ ”kunna läsa, sammanfatta och kommentera innehållet i längre skönlitterära texter”.

⁴ ”kunna läsa skönlitteratur från några olika epoker och inom olika genrer samt kunna i anknytning till läsningen reflektera över texternas innehåll och form utifrån olika perspektiv”.

learning about cultures in other countries to the ability to read and analyze a text from different perspectives. In the new syllabus Gy11 for English 5 it is stated that students shall read fictional novels and other fictional texts. For English 6 and 7 it is stated that the student should have knowledge about older and contemporary fictional novels (skolverket.se). The student should also be able to understand different kinds of texts and understand different kinds of written English. The syllabi 5, 6 and 7 for English courses at the senior high school claim that the students shall have the opportunity to develop “1. Knowledge about oral and written English as well as possess the capacity to analyze the content” (skolverket.se) (my translation).⁵

The actual use of reading and the analysis of literature at the senior high school level is presented in the Swedish curriculum and syllabi. Even if it does not have a big part of the whole course it is something that should be included in English language studies. Reading of literary texts is easy to combine with other language abilities such as practicing vocabulary or oral presentations. Book reviews are a common way to practice oral presentation or practicing writing skills. To sum up, literary texts are excellent complements when practicing different kinds of language proficiency.

2.2 *Push* by Sapphire, a presentation of the novel

The novel *Push* is written by the American author and poet Sapphire. Her birth name was Ramona Lofton and she was born in California, 1950. She later changed her name to Sapphire which she felt suited her better because she could picture Sapphire on the cover of a book rather than her birth name. Among other professions, she has worked as a teacher of reading and writing in English. However it was poetry that she was really devoted to. In 1996 her novel *Push* was published and later the novel became an Academy award winning movie called *Precious* (2009). The title of the movie was changed so it would not be confused with the action movie *Push*.⁶

The novel *Push* is about a young girl called Claireece Precious Jones. She is the narrator of the novel which is set in Harlem, New York in 1987. In the novel, the reader follows

⁵ ”1. Förståelse av talad och skriven engelska samt förmåga att tolka innehållet”.

⁶ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0465580/>

the life of 16-year-old Precious who is obese, illiterate and African American. She lives in a harsh reality which Sapphire captures by using a raw and descriptive language with profanity. Precious speaks African American English which enhances the sense of authenticity of the narrative.

Precious has given birth to two children by her father one of which has Down's syndrome. Her father has abused her since she was a little child. He has moved out and living with another woman and now Precious' mother abuses her instead. School work is not going very well for Precious and she gets suspended from her school when they learn about her pregnancy with her second child. She is rescued when she gets the opportunity to go to an alternative school called "Each One Teach One". There she meets Ms. Blue Rain, her teacher who becomes her biggest support in the search for a good and new life. Precious will with the help of Ms. Blue Rain learn to read and write and eventually gain more faith in the future and in herself. At the school she meets girls who also come from troublesome backgrounds and they will eventually be supportive of one another.

2.3 Why is *Push* well-suited to use in the language classroom?

The novel *Push* is not the typical novel to work with in Swedish schools. *Push* addresses issues of incest, rape and abusive violence which can be hard and difficult topics to work with and discuss in class. Without a teacher's guidelines and supervision or in absence of reflection and discussions of the novel, reading it independently would not be appropriate. Still, I believe the novel can be a useful choice if the teacher carefully picks an appropriate passage to work with. The story of how Precious finds identity through literacy can be a source of motivation for teenage readers.

2.3.1 *Push* as an authentic text

The novel *Push* is an authentic text which means that it is not written for the purpose of learning English. The most common books in schools are prescribed books which are designed for students who are learning English. Those books are usually good and manageable when dealing with a class of thirty students. These prescribed books are usually divided into different levels because all students do not have the same proficiency or same skills when learning English. This is something that gives both the

teacher and the student confidence, but on the other hand it might not be very stimulating to work with that kind of material. It would be favorable if the teacher chooses to work with both a course book and use authentic texts in order to provide structure as well as giving students the language of an authentic text. Bo Lundahl provides persuasive arguments for reading and working with authentic texts in the language classroom. He claims that authentic novels for children and young adults provide a greater variation than prescribed books or other simplified texts which make them more interesting and more real for students. He also claims that constructed texts can in some cases be too removed from the students' reality; hence they will be disinterested in reading. Lundahl also points out that from a cultural point of view many everyday expressions and the juvenile's everyday life is ignored in these constructed texts. There are not many simplified texts that interest children and juveniles; on the other hand many authentic texts describe the lives of children and juveniles from their own perspective in their own English speaking countries (Lundahl 1998:61-62). One other reason for reading and working with authentic literature is that students will be exposed to a language written for a native English person.

In reading literary text, students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on. (Collie & Slater 1987:4)

This is very much the case with *Push*. When reading *Push* one follows a young girl's life story and even if she is surrounded by many difficulties, similar events actually happen all around the world. As Lundahl claims, students may relate to some aspect of Precious's story and find it more interesting to read. In addition this novel is written with an African American perspective which brings a particular authenticity to the story as well. Concerning the influence of African American English in the novel, it is something a teacher should think about because the language can sometimes be a bit difficult. On the other hand, I believe it is good if students familiarize themselves with different kinds of English language varieties.

2.3.2 *Push* vs. Literary classics

As mentioned in section 2.3, *Push* is not a traditional type of novel to read in schools today. From my own experience, many teachers choose canonical authors such as Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and George Orwell. Traditional classical novels written by, for example, Dickens can develop the student's general knowledge about English literature. It is important that students have knowledge about some famous and important English writers and their work and get insight in a few of these famous writers' works which are recognized as great English literature. The students also gain knowledge about English literary culture and history. It is moreover important for students to gain understanding and knowledge about other present day stories. Through literature students can reflect and analyze difficult and important contemporary topics, and by reading *Push* that can be accomplished.

Even if Sapphire is not a classic writer as are for example Brontë and Orwell, she is highly appreciated by some literary critics. In *The New York Times* Michiko Kakutani⁷ describes *Push* as “a novel that manages to be disturbing, affecting and manipulative all at the same time” (nytimes.com). But Kakutani also points out that even if the story is horrible and heartbreaking at times it is not a story about a helpless victim. “‘Push,’ however, is not the story of a helpless or self-loathing victim. It's meant to be a story of female empowerment and triumph” (nytimes.se). Kakutani also mentions the parallels *Push* have to Alice Walker's *Color Purple* which is novel about a young African American girl in the early nineteen century. Both Walker's Celie and Sapphire's Precious manage to survive a brutal childhood and both of them get pregnant as young girls by men they believe are their fathers.

Push as a contemporary novel is appropriate since it addresses social conditions in possibly one of the greatest nations in the world. The portrayal of a hard and tough society where education is becoming more and more important for the individual, and the representation of one's identity and ability to function in a society, is a highly recognizable theme in many parts of the world today.

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/14/books/books-of-the-times-a-cruel-world-endless-until-a-teacher-steps-in.html?ref=bookreviews>

2.3.3 *Push* and existential questions

Push manages to pose a few rather important existential questions regarding human rights and the meaning of life. Finding your identity and knowing who you are is a theme throughout the novel. This is a theme a Swedish student in one way or another may find pertinent and appealing. As teenagers in senior high school, students are about to make several significant decisions about their future, therefore *Push* is an appropriate novel with various possible existential topics to discuss. How Precious establishes self-esteem through literacy is foremost interesting to study. By reading this novel students will familiarize themselves with another reality; Precious' life and surroundings are very different from Swedish society. Students will learn about how it is to grow up with all these terrible difficulties but manage nevertheless and find one's own identity.

The character Precious is struggling through her daily life. She wants to fit in but she is mostly looked at as someone who is illiterate and her obesity does not make it easier for her. She, however, is growing as a person when she learns to read and write in school and by that she is creating a new identity as well as discovering her individual strengths for the first time. By educating herself, Precious establishes self-esteem. I believe this topic of self-esteem is where the focus should be when teaching the book, on how Precious finds her identity and becomes confident by gaining literacy. By focusing and reading about this, students will acquire knowledge about another culture and about how important education is. Gender issues are also something that can be discussed when reading *Push*. All the girls in the "Each One Teach One" class have been abused by men. Therefore it is relevant to consider gender issues which the school curriculum directs us to do.

2.3.4 *Push* and the Curriculum

The Swedish curriculum provides several reasons for teaching a novel such as *Push*. In the curriculum under *norms and values* it states that "the school shall strive to ensure that all pupils:

- work against people being exposed to oppression and abusive treatment and are a source of help for other people,
- understand and respect other people and cultures" (*Lpf94:14*).

“Goals to attain

- can use specialist literature, fiction and other forms of culture as a source of knowledge, insight and joy” (*Lpf94:11*).

These goals can be attained by reading *Push* since the novel provides a story about isolation and estrangement in another culture. Students will gain knowledge about how to treat each other for example, not to bully and respect to one another.

By reading *Push*, gender issues can be discussed and brought up which is something the curriculum indicates school education should attend to. The novel portrays women and their view of the world. Men are portrayed as being violent since all the women in the novel have had bad experiences with men. From a gender perspective this may seem discriminating. Gunilla Molloy implies that a teacher can choose a similar novel if the teacher’s motive is to problematize these gender aspects and hear students’ reactions to the novel. For example, can they find reasons for why the author portrayed men in a specific way? (Molloy 2003:33). The fundamental values expressed in the curriculum are described as “The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are all values that the school shall represent and impart” (*Lpf94:3*). This novel can also be used in different school subjects, such as in religious studies where ethics is a part of the course and focus can be on areas, such as disabilities, Down’s syndrome, H.I.V, ethnic diversity, bullying or teen pregnancy. There is almost no end to the possible topics to address when teaching this novel. All these topics are part of adult life and students should benefit from having discussed and reflected over such topics. After all, it is the school’s responsibility to prepare students for adult life.

3. How to work with *Push* in the language classroom

This project’s pedagogical focus is on a language learning process which is presented in section 3.1. The main assignment in this lesson plan is to write a story about the continued life of one of the students in the novel’s special needs class after reading a passage from the novel. Students will see parts from the novel’s film adaptation and behind the scenes material. Since the film adaptation has been well reviewed by critics, I believe viewing the film would be a good pedagogical addition to the novel. Therefore I find it appropriate to use it as a complement to reading the novel. The use of the film adaptation is mainly to raise students’ interest and make them motivated. It will give

them an overview of the plot since the students are not going to read the entire novel and thus need some kind of background before they start to read the chosen passage. A recommendation would be to choose a passage concerning the part of the novel where the main character is situated in a school environment since the text they are going to produce is based on the characters who Precious meets in school. Watching parts from the film adaptation and behind scenes will serve as an *introduction* to the project. All life story texts that the students write will be put together into a collection and published. There are several possible ways nowadays to *publish* such a work. It could be published on the class Internet portal or the teacher could collect the stories and put them together as a compendium and then hand them out to the class. Another way of publishing their work could be by creating an online blog where the students' themselves can post their texts and comment on each other's texts. The idea of publishing all students' stories will hopefully make them more alert when writing and more motivated by the chance to have their texts collected in print.

The project is outlined below:

1. **Introduction** by watching a part of the film
2. **Reading** a selected passage from the novel.
3. **First draft** the students write
4. **Peer- response** comment and help each other to improve the text
5. **Second draft** the students write and hand in to the teacher
6. **Assessment** by the teacher
7. **Publication** collect all stories and hand them out in class

The writing process framework is used to make the most out of the writing exercise. After students have read *Push*, students can start working by writing a *first draft* where they write down their thoughts and what they want to say. If students write a fictional first person narrative it might be easier for everyone to participate than if they were about to write something personal. When they are finished with the first draft they should have some kind of response to what they have written. By having *peer-response*, an activity referred to in English 5 syllabus, students reflect on their own work and hopefully learn from each other. Since their written texts will be published they may

take it more seriously and help each other to correct mistakes. When they have had peer-response, the students work again on their texts and change or correct mistakes and create a *second draft*.

I find it important to have some kind of grading or *assessment* for a project similar to this (see appendix 3). The students have been working on their texts for weeks and should have teacher response to their work. Therefore, the grading will be based on the syllabus grading criteria and how well they have worked throughout the project with, for example, peer-response. Also by having a publication of their works, students themselves can see how other pupils have interpreted the assignment and how they have chosen to complete it. Hence these students might find it fun to read their classmates texts in order to receive an understanding of how differently texts can be perceived. When using a writing process framework several language skills will be practiced such as reading, writing and speaking. Through these three language skills students will acquire broader literacy. In section 3.1, the use of a writing process framework will be presented. In the presented writing process focus will be on reading, writing and speaking skills. It describes and discusses why a writing process is beneficial in the language classroom and why all three language skills reading, writing and speaking are important for developing language proficiency and gaining literacy.

3.1 The writing process

The pedagogical use of the writing process has changed over the years. The early cognitive way of writing mostly placed attention on the ability to put ones thoughts into words. Firstly, one was supposed to brainstorm and then come up with something to put on paper. Secondly, there were prescribed steps that were to be followed as students progressed toward end products. Usually the student writes a draft then lets the teacher read it and make grammatical and vocabulary notes, which the student should be able to correct without any further explanation about his/hers mistakes. This way of directing students to write in a precise, step by step way has been questioned. Today researchers acknowledge a less rigid order when practicing writing and they believe that by using a writing process framework the text will progress over time and not be forced. It is important for students to get inspiration and opportunities to reflect during the process. Therefore peer-response and support from the teacher is important and favorable. Also by having peer-response students will practice their speaking skills. Lundahl is very

positive towards the writing process; still he indicates the importance of a final coherent and well-structured text (Lundahl 2009:217).

The use of the writing process is beneficial since it provides several ways for students to express themselves. The aim is to get students motivated to start their writing process and practice writing skills which will result in a higher level of acquiring literacy. It is also a way for students to evaluate and reflect on their own work. During the process writing students will practice their reading skills, writing skills and speaking proficiency. The connection between reading, thinking and writing is highly important since it enhances the process and development of individual thinking which is one of the core principals in the Swedish curriculum.

It is important to have a structure when working with language and constantly trying to improve and develop student's language skills. Since students do not learn in the same way, the writing process can facilitate the learning process. Tornberg claims that the following statements provide why a writing process is favorable.

- It (the process writing) develops individual thinking.
- It is creative.
- It involves the student since her/his own thinking, feelings and opinions are concerned.
- It develops the students' own language.
- It develops reading skills.

(Tornberg 126, my translation).

By writing a similar text to what they have read about in the novel, students can hopefully be more motivated to complete the assignment. In the novel the characters wrote journals to get their writing process started, even if they did not know the correct language they learnt by practicing. Since this is a start of a writing project in the novel, a similar approach can be used in the lesson. The use of a writing process is beneficial since the three main language abilities reading, writing and speaking are practiced.

4. Questionnaire results

This section gives a summary of answers to a questionnaire concerning the use of authentic texts and the specific use of *Push* in the English language classroom. The teachers who answered the questionnaire have seen the proposed lesson plan, the time schedule and the background, aim and grading for the use of the *Push* (see appendices 1, 2 and 3). The responses summarized also include direct quotes from individual teachers.

Pros and cons for the use of authentic literature in the language classroom?

All teachers were positive towards using authentic literature in the language classroom. They believed students will broaden their vocabularies and they will encounter the world outside of the school. One teacher pointed out that by practicing reading longer texts it will be a good way to challenge students and give them an opportunity to show their skills. One teacher also addressed that several aims of the English course can be reached by reading authentic literature. Teachers hoped students would discover the benefits of reading a good novel from time to time.

The teachers primarily concerns of reading authentic literature in the language classroom were that it can be too challenging for certain students and it is time consuming. They also emphasized the importance of choosing an appropriate text.

Is this a valid lesson plan concerning; - Topic, aim and time schedule?

All teachers were positive towards the topic although one teacher pointed out the difference between students who study in an academic preparatory programme and students studying in a vocational program. The teachers believed it to be too challenging for those students to continue to write a life story.

Concerning the aim and time schedule the teachers were over all positive. Again one teacher claimed that students in a vocational programme can have difficulty with this assignment. "They have hardly read a book in Swedish in their lives, even less in

English. They write when forced to, but without imagination” (see appendix 5). All teachers pointed out the difficulty with planning a time schedule and that it often changed during a project. One teacher gave the following answer to the question concerning the time schedule. “Looks OK at a first glance, but my experience tell that many things you do in the classroom require more time than calculated from the beginning. My advice here is to be flexible and have a couple of more lessons to use if necessary” (see appendix 5).

Do you have any recommendations regarding this lesson plan?

Recommendations regarding this lesson plan were mainly what have been mentioned in previous answers. Primarily, the teachers suggested to be aware of that students are individuals and to be flexible concerning the time schedule. At the same time one teacher claims that a teacher should not be afraid of trying new things in the language classroom. Another recommendation was to explain key words such as “first person narrative” to be certain of that all students understand. Another teacher points out the motivation in watching a passage from the film, but points out the importance of choosing the “right” passage. “And take time to choose the “right” passage from the film. Reward the pupils afterwards by letting them watch the complete film!” (see appendix 5).

5. Analysis of the results

According to the questionnaire responses, it seems as teachers have a positive attitude to authentic texts in the English language classroom. They believe students may gain several language abilities by reading authentic texts such as vocabulary, their reading skills will improve and they will be acquainted with contemporary and classical texts. Some teachers even believed students could get a new perspective on their own lives. By reading and working with authentic texts in a language classroom students can gain and develop language abilities as well as develop some sort of self-awareness. I would claim that authentic texts in the language classroom are positively accepted by teachers, though there are certain components that should be taken under serious consideration. One teacher emphasized the differences between different programmes, for instance differences between the college preparatory programs and vocational programmes. That teacher, for example, claimed students in a vehicle/mechanics programme would find it

very hard to read authentic texts and complete the presented assignment. It is certainly true that different programmes and individual students have different knowledge about the subject and do not have the same motivation. However, it is the teacher's responsibility to adapt and use appropriate themes, topics and assignments in the classroom to make it suitable for the specific class.

Though some teachers may be skeptical, in my opinion this project could be appropriate for all three English levels at the senior high school. There would need to be some changes in the lesson plan and time schedule which is something that always can happen even between different classes and not only between different courses as the a-b courses. I find it important, especially as a new teacher, to discuss with co-workers about possible lesson plans, assignments etc. because as a new teacher it can be advantageous to discuss and exchange ideas with other teachers. I would also claim that my presented lesson plan could work; still all teachers should be aware of the many possibilities which can affect a lesson plan. Teachers should always have to take under consideration that a time schedule is never one hundred percent reliable. Teachers should also be prepared for students who do not attend lesson(s) and may need to catch up on some of the work the other students have done during the lesson(s). Teachers who have answered the questionnaire also address the possibility that students may not choose to read at home. This, however, should of course be expected; what is not completed in class needs to be done as homework. Still, unfortunately, there will be occasions where students do not keep up with the time schedule. In these cases teachers should be prepared by providing extra material, for example, providing a sort of summary of the film which gives students an overall understanding of the plot.

I would agree with the teachers about what students primarily will learn from this assignment. They practice their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills while working with texts and while applying the writing process and hence have a great possibility to improve in many language areas. The use of process writing and peer-response has many advantages and teachers at the senior high school have a positive opinion of them. Some teachers claimed that students will learn more about another culture. I agree. This assignment provides for greater knowledge about another culture in an English speaking country. Even if the story is a bit intensely dramatized it presents a believable set of difficulties.

One teacher gave the recommendation to reward the students by watching the whole film adaptation. It would be motivating for students to know that they will see an entire film. The only difficulty with watching an entire film is that it requires quite a long time. Another teacher suggested expanding the project by a few lessons and giving students more time to work in the classroom. Here the teacher has to decide what is most appropriate for the specific class. Another suggestion from a teacher was to explain key words and terms for students. The teacher claimed that the term “first person narrative” needed to be explained. A text should not be too difficult for students still they need to be challenged in order to learn. When students do not know a word there is an excellent opportunity for them to practice their ‘searching abilities’. Students should be able to search for information independently, if they do not know a word they can find it in a dictionary.

6. Conclusion

This essay has acknowledged the central role of studying literature. It has argued for the use of authentic texts in the language classroom. A lesson plan for the use of the novel *Push* is also presented. To receive opinions about my lesson plan, teachers at the senior high school answered a questionnaire. The four fundamental pedagogical questions *what, why, when and how* have been answered in this essay. These pedagogical questions are something a teacher always should consider when planning an activity or a lesson. It is important to always reflect on what the students are supposed to do, why they are doing it, what will they gain and learn. These pedagogical questions are important for a teacher to stay innovative.

The pedagogical question *why* one should read *Push* in the English language classroom has been given several answers which have been presented in this essay. It is stated in the Swedish syllabi that authentic texts should be a part of a student’s education. Even if literature studies do not have a large part in English language courses other language abilities can be practiced with the help of literature. On the other hand, difficulties from reading authentic texts have been discussed in this essay. If one should use authentic texts when teaching English one should prepare the lesson well in advance and be careful to choose an appropriate text which suits the intended class. The question *how* was answered by presenting a lesson plan and an assignment. The presented lesson plan was well received by teachers; overall they felt that the theme was appropriate. The time schedule was questioned and a teacher pointed out the possibility that some students

would not do their homework and not read at home. This is very realistic and there will also be students who miss lessons due to sickness or other. I believe, however, it is the teacher's responsibility to help those students and be prepared by having some kind of exercise or summary of the missed lesson. The use of authentic texts when teaching literature has been supported by the language skills that will be practiced and improved.

The authentic text I have chosen to work with in the language classroom is *Push* which answers the *what* question. I have chosen *Push* because I believe it is engaging, memorable and has many topics to involve in English language teaching. I am aware of the possible difficulties and conflicts with a novel such as *Push* due to such strong and horrible issues contained in the novel; teachers have to be careful when planning a lesson based on the suggestions made in this essay. The students and their maturity have to be taken under consideration and evaluated prior to lesson planning. Still *Push* can contribute to developing many language skills and increasing students' awareness of their own identity by reflecting on existential questions and learning about another culture. There is also the possibility to use the novel in other courses than English. It suits as a base for discussions concerning bullying and alienation which need to be discussed in school in order to prevent from happening.

To receive an answer to the last question *when* I have asked thirteen teachers from a senior high school to answer a questionnaire, three answers were sent back. I asked teachers at the senior high school about my lesson plan because I wanted to know *when* and if the presented lesson plan was appropriate to use when teaching English.

Responses to the lesson plan would of course have been more reliable if several more teachers had given their comments and shared their experiences. Nevertheless, three teachers gave their comments; therefore, this can be considered a pilot case study that can be the base for further research. The participants in the study indicated that students who are studying in a preparatory academic programme would likely be more successful to achieve a higher rate of task fulfillment when it comes to working with the lesson assignment presented in this essay compared to those students in a vocational programme. Therefore, further research might study the degree of differences in achievement between studying in a preparatory academic programme and in a practical programme.

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Appendices 1-5

Appendix 1- Assignment for *Push*

Assignment for *Push*



After you have read the last passage from *Push*, your assignment will be to continue the story. Chose one of the characters and imagine what happened to her, and try continuing her life story. How did her life turn out? Use inspiration from the film and what you have read to create your narratives.

Write from a first person narrative. The paper should be about one page long written on the computer.

The following could be included in your story;

- What is she doing now, working or studying?
- Where does she live?
- Has she got a family or friends?
- How is she dealing with her past?

Appendix 2 – Time schedule

Time schedule
week.

60 min lessons/ 2 times per

Lesson 1: Introduction, watch film, start to read.

Homework: Read the passage

Lesson 2: Go through the assignment, start to write.

Lesson 3: Write, watch material from behind the scenes (for inspiration)

Homework: Have a draft until next lesson!

Lesson 4: Share your work in groups (of 3), give each other comments, is there anything you would like to know more about? How can the text be further developed?

Homework: Change and correct possible faults and mistakes.

Lesson 5: Hand in the assignment.

Publication: All your stories will be put together in a collection which later will be handed out in class.

Good luck!

/Ingrid

Appendix 3- Background, aim and grading

Background

Students will have seen the film adaptation of *Push* called *Precious*. They will watch a section from the film to get to know the characters and understand the story. They will then read the last passage where the pupils in the novel write about their life stories.

This is an introduction to the student's assignment which is to write a story about what happened to one of the girls. The students will chose one of the characters and continue her life story.

This is an appropriate assignment for:

- A English 5 course
- In the beginning of the course/term.
- As an introduction to a longer writing project.

Aim

Is for students to find motivation by reading an authentic text, develop their language skills by process writing, to be comfortable in their class for further project/assignments.

From Gy2011;

Ämnets syfte

"Eleven ska ges möjlighet att utveckla kunskaper om livsvillkor, samhällsfrågor och kulturella företeelser i olika sammanhang och delar av världen där engelska används".

"I undervisningen ska eleverna få möta talad och skriven engelska av olika slag samt få sätta innehållet i relation till egna erfarenheter och kunskaper".

English 5

"Central innehåll- undervisningen i kursen ska behandla följande centrala innehåll:"

- Innehåll och form i olika typer av fiktion.
- Talat språk, även med viss social och dialektal färgning, och texter som är instruerande, berättande, sammanfattande, förklarande, diskuterande, rapportering och argumenterande, även via film och andra medier.
- Skönlitteratur och annan fiktion.
- Hur ord och fraser i muntliga och skriftliga framställningar skapar struktur och sammanhang genom att tydliggöra inledning, orsakssammanhang, tidsaspekt och slutsats.
- Bearbetning av egna och andras muntliga och skriftliga framställningar för att variera, tydliggöra och precisera samt för att skapa struktur och anpassa till syftet och situationen. I detta ingår användning av ord och fraser som tydliggör orsakssammanhang och tidsaspekter.

(www.skolverket.se)

Grading

The students will be assessed on how well they understand the assignment and how well they write and speak. Presented below is the Swedish grading criterion for the English 5 course.

Betyget E

Eleven kan förstå **huvudsakligt innehåll och uppfatta tydliga detaljer** i talad engelska i varierande tempo och i tydligt formulerad skriven engelska, i olika genrer. Eleven visar sin förståelse genom att **översiktligt** redogöra för, diskutera och kommentera innehåll och detaljer samt genom att med **godtagbart** resultat agera utifrån budskap och instruktioner i innehållet.

Eleven kan välja och **med viss säkerhet** använda strategier för att tillgodogöra sig och kritiskt granska innehållet i talad och skriven engelska.

Eleven väljer texter och talat språk från olika medier och kan på ett relevant sätt använda det valda materialet i sin egen produktion och interaktion.

I muntliga och skriftliga framställningar i olika genrer kan eleven formulera sig **relativt** varierat, **relativt** tydligt och **relativt** sammanhängande. Eleven kan formulera sig med **visst** flyt och **i någon mån anpassat** till syfte, mottagare och situation. Eleven bearbetar, och gör förbättringar av, egna framställningar.

I muntlig och skriftlig interaktion i olika, även mer formella, sammanhang kan eleven uttrycka sig tydligt och med **visst** flyt samt med **viss** anpassning till syfte, mottagare och situation. Dessutom kan eleven välja och använda **i huvudsak** fungerande strategier som **i viss mån** löser problem i och förbättrar interaktionen.

Eleven diskuterar **översiktligt** några företeelser i olika sammanhang och delar av världen där engelska används, och kan då också göra **enkla** jämförelser med egna erfarenheter och kunskaper.

Betyget D

Betyget D innebär att kunskapskraven för E och till övervägande del för C är uppfyllda.

Betyget C

Eleven kan förstå **huvudsakligt innehåll och uppfatta väsentliga detaljer** i talad engelska i varierande tempo och i tydligt formulerad skriven engelska, i olika genrer. Eleven visar sin förståelse genom att **välgrundat** redogöra för, diskutera och kommentera innehåll och detaljer samt genom att med **tillfredsställande** resultat agera utifrån budskap och instruktioner i innehållet.

Eleven kan välja och **med viss säkerhet** använda strategier för att tillgodogöra sig och kritiskt granska innehållet i talad och skriven engelska.

Eleven väljer texter och talat språk från olika medier och använder på ett relevant och **effektivt** sätt det valda materialet i sin egen produktion och interaktion.

I muntliga och skriftliga framställningar i olika genrer kan eleven formulera sig **relativt** varierat, tydligt, sammanhängande och **relativt strukturerat**. Eleven kan även formulera sig med flyt och **viss anpassning** till syfte, mottagare och situation. Eleven bearbetar, och gör **välgrundade** förbättringar av, egna framställningar.

I muntlig och skriftlig interaktion i olika, även mer formella, sammanhang kan eleven uttrycka sig tydligt och med flyt samt med **viss** anpassning till syfte, mottagare och

situation. Dessutom kan eleven välja och använda fungerande strategier som löser problem i och förbättrar interaktionen.

Eleven diskuterar **utförligt** några företeelser i olika sammanhang och delar av världen där engelska används, och kan då också göra **välutvecklade** jämförelser med egna erfarenheter och kunskaper.

Betyget B

Betyget B innebär att kunskapskraven för C och till övervägande del för A är uppfyllda.

Betyget A

Eleven kan förstå **såväl helhet som detaljer** i talad engelska i varierande tempo och i tydligt formulerad skriven engelska, i olika genrer. Eleven visar sin förståelse genom att **välgrundat och nyanserat** redogöra för, diskutera och kommentera innehåll och detaljer samt genom att med **gott** resultat agera utifrån budskap och instruktioner i innehållet.

Eleven kan välja och **med säkerhet** använda strategier för att tillgodogöra sig och kritiskt granska innehållet i talad och skriven engelska.

Eleven väljer texter och talat språk från olika medier och använder på ett relevant, **effektivt och kritiskt** sätt det valda materialet i sin egen produktion och interaktion.

I muntliga och skriftliga framställningar i olika genrer kan eleven formulera sig varierat, tydligt, sammanhängande **och strukturerat**. Eleven kan även formulera sig med flyt och **viss anpassning** till syfte, mottagare och situation. Eleven bearbetar, och gör **välgrundade och nyanserade** förbättringar av, egna framställningar.

I muntlig och skriftlig interaktion i olika, även mer formella, sammanhang uttrycker sig eleven tydligt, **relativt ledigt** och med flyt samt med anpassning till syfte, mottagare och situation. Dessutom kan eleven välja och använda **väl** fungerande strategier som löser problem i och förbättrar interaktionen **och för den framåt på ett konstruktivt sätt**.

Eleven diskuterar **utförligt och nyanserat** några företeelser i olika sammanhang och delar av världen där engelska används, och kan då också göra **välutvecklade och nyanserade** jämförelser med egna erfarenheter och kunskaper.

www.skolverket.se

Appendix 4- *Push* by Sapphire, a presentation of the novel

The novel *Push* is written by the American author and poet Sapphire. Her birth name was Ramona Lofton and she was born in California, 1950. She later changed her name to Sapphire which she felt suited her better. Among other professions, she has worked as a teacher of reading and writing in English. But it was poetry that she was really devoted to. In 1996 her novel *Push* was published and later the novel became an Academy award winning movie called *Precious*. The movie title was changed so it would not be confused with the action movie *Push*.⁸

The novel *Push* is about a young girl called Claireece Precious Jones. She is the narrator of the novel which is set in Harlem, New York in 1987. In the novel the reader follows the life of 16 years old Precious who is obese, illiterate and African American. She lives in a harsh reality which Sapphire captures by using a raw and descriptive language with profanity. Precious speaks African American English which enhances the sense of authenticity of the narrative.

Precious has given birth to two children by her father who has abused her since she was a little child. Her father has moved out to another woman and now Precious mother abuses her instead. School is not going very well for Precious and she gets suspended from her school when they understand that she is pregnant with her second child. Her rescue is when she gets the opportunity to go to an alternative school called "Each One Teach One". There she meets her teacher Ms. Blue Rain who becomes her biggest support in the search for a good and new life. Precious will with the help of Ms. Blue Rain learn to read and write and eventually gain more faith in the future and in herself. At the school she meets girls who also come from troublesome backgrounds and they will eventually be supportive of one another.

⁸ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0465580/>

Appendix 5- The questionnaire and results

1. Pros and cons for the use of authentic literature in the language classroom?

Pros:

A: It will hopefully improve students' awareness and language skills. Several aims of the English courses are reached.

B: Lots! Pupils become familiar with different kinds of "Englishes", they broaden their vocabularies, they become acquainted with contemporary (and classical) writers and texts, they practice reading longer texts, it's a good way to challenge the pupils and a possibility for them to show their skills.

C: You encounter the world outside the school walls. You read texts written for others than pupils. You train your understanding of written English and learn words, expressions, word order, spelling etc. Hopefully some pupils discover the benefits of reading a novel now and then.

Cons:

A: Depending on the text, some texts can be too difficult to comprehend for the students.

B: Sometimes too difficult for certain pupils or groups, it might be hard to understand the context if you just read a short extract

C: To read a whole book is time consuming. To have pupils read a lot in their spare time might work, but not on all programmes. If the pupils don't read – the concept fails. To read an extract from a book and add film cuts work better, I think. (Hopefully 100% of the pupils are present in the class as the cuts are performed.)

2. Is this a valid lesson plan concerning;

- Topic –

A: Yes,

B: Yes, I believe the topic can work well in a class with girls and boys on a study preparing programme.

C: I don't think it can work at all with students on e.g. a practical vehicle programme. They might see the movie and make a few comments, but most of them would be unable to continue to write a life story.

- The aim –

A: (Maybe it is more suitable for the English 6 (B-level) course),

B: Yes,

C: The aim can absolutely be reached, but I believe it is an advantage, and maybe a condition, that the pupils are the least habituated in reading and writing to do so. Once again, I compare with my own pupils in the vehicle/mechanics programme and I'm sorry to say that most of them would never grasp the meaning of such an assignment. They have hardly read a book in Swedish in their lives, even less in English. They write when forced to, but without imagination. But when it comes to working with their hands, repairing cars, they are excellent!

- Time schedule –

A: Yes

B: It might take longer than that, you cannot always expect the pupils to read at home... Even though you should! Otherwise it's fine!

C: Looks OK at a first glance, but my experience tells me that many things you do in the classroom require more time than calculated from the beginning. My advice here is to be flexible and have a couple of more lessons to use if necessary.

3. What knowledge do you believe students might primarily gain from this lesson?

A: How life can treat a young girl in the U.S.

B: See answer to question 1.

+ Peer response is a good way of improving your writing skills. The pupils might get a new perspective on their own lives. They get to practice all four abilities: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

C: They will hopefully gain the joy of reading, and of developing their own production of written English.

4. Do you have any recommendations regarding this lesson plan?

A: No, good luck!:)

B: Not in particular. But try to be flexible when it comes to the time schedule! And take time to choose the "right" passage from the film. Reward the pupils afterwards by letting them watch the complete film!

In general, be aware of that pupils and groups of pupils are different. What works with some, might not work at all with others (but don't be afraid of trying).

C: The lesson plan can absolutely work with study motivated pupils that are used to do home work. The plan would most certainly fail with pupils on a vehicle programme, most of them would not even understand the written instruction.

Make sure your pupils understand words like "first person narrative".

I like the publication part of the assignment. It brings authenticity to the whole project, and if the pupils know that everybody will be able to read their text, it hopefully makes them put more effort into their texts.