Stimulating Reading among Upper Secondary ESL Speakers through a Cooperative Approach

Engelsk didaktik 15 hp

2018-06-08
Peter Larsson
Table of Content

1. Introduction, p. 3
   1.2. Background, p. 4

2. Literary Review, p. 6
   2.1. Plot Summary of Behold the Dreamers, p. 12

3. Methodology, p. 13
   3.1. Students’ Introduction and Ethics, p. 13
   3.2. The Structures, p. 14
   3.3. Students’ Feedback, p. 17
   3.4. Analysis of Voice Recordings from the Two Lessons, p. 19
      3.4.1. Record 1, p.19
      3.4.2. Record 2, p. 20
      3.4.3. Record 3, p. 21
      3.4.4. Record 4, p. 22

4. Discussion, p. 22
   4.1. Scaffolding by Peers, p. 23
   4.2. Increasing Output, p. 24
   4.3. Role Play, p. 24
   4.4. Social Benefits of CL, p. 25
   4.5. Team Work, p. 26
   4.6. Teachers’ Scaffolding, p. 27
   4.7. Monitoring, p. 28

5. Conclusion, p. 29

6. Works Cited, p. 31
Stimulating Reading among Upper Secondary ESL Speakers through a Cooperative Approach

"The written word, obviously, is very inward, and when we're reading, we're thinking. It's a sort of spiritual, meditative activity. When we're looking at visual objects, I think our eyes are obviously directed outward, so there's not as much reflective time. And it's the reflectiveness and the spiritual inwardness about reading that appeals to me."

Joyce Carol Oates

1. Introduction

Decoding words and understanding explicit as well as implicit messages in texts are central abilities required for success in school and work life. As these in turn affect the wealth and progression of Western society, it should be of greatest concern that young students receive an effective reading education in school.

As the linguist Stephen Krashen argues (1995), free voluntary reading is the most important way of acquiring a second language. However, when reading as a spare time activity is pushed out by computerized leisure habits, (Skolverket 2015, 3) it can cause negative results with regards to language development. As Swedish ESL teachers, we, therefore, have an obligation
to inspire and guide our learners on the path to exploring fiction in the classroom. To carry out such a task requires more than handing over a copy of a century-old literary classic. One effective way to work with the many aspects of reading fiction, however, could be cooperative approaches to learning.

In this essay I will explain in detail how a cooperative approach to reading fiction can be applied to a Swedish ESL classroom setting. In particular I will report on how I used it to create and execute two lessons at an upper secondary school in Halmstad in early October 2017. I will also present the students’ responses to the method, together with previous research within the area that supports my research questions.

1.2. Background

Since the 1970’s researchers, such as Spencer Kagan, Robert Slavin, David Johnson, Roger Johnson, and others, have studied cooperative learning methods, and have subsequently developed learning strategies grounded on the results and findings from those studies; strategies with the underlying assumption that knowledge is more effectively achieved in structuralized teamwork, rather than through traditional, teacher-led approaches to learning. In *Cooperative Learning* (CL) students collaborate on given tasks, usually in small groups of two to five individuals. The focus is primarily not on the teacher, but on the, for the purpose designed, exercises which the students work on together. The teacher serves as an instructor of those exercises, a catalyst for the learning process that, once started in its classroom satellites, can be effectively monitored by the teacher. Recurring results from research into cooperative learning are: Effective acquisition of knowledge (Vygotsky 1962), increased individual output in the classroom (Kagan 1995), and development of social competence (Slavin 1995). The concept of cooperative learning has changed the way many learners and teachers view education, since it has spread rapidly over the last twenty years, and has been incorporated in classroom activities all around the globe.
In this essay I will try and present how cooperative learning methods go together with in-class reading of fiction literature in an ESL English class. A certain event worth mentioning, however, ignited my work with this essay.

A rainy day this summer my daughter and a friend of her, both eleven years old, sat on the living room floor playing a dice game. The children’s idea of playing this game, which is designed to stimulate creative storytelling, was to take turns throwing the five dice, line them up and trying to make a story of the symbols. I decided to interrupt the girls with a simple proposal: I suggested that the players start a story based on whatever symbol went topside up, and then hand over the dice to the next player. The next player should then *continue* the story initiated by the first player, based on what symbol came topside up for her. The children immediately took up the new practice of the dice and started a long winding braid of a story, a beautiful conjunction made up of two inspired minds. The difference between the first and the second game might be of minor importance for someone giving it just a quick glance. However, the small change of rules created a whole new game, which can be seen as representative for a cooperative approach: instead of producing a speech act *individually*, it is produced *collaboratively*. The students are *scaffolding* (Wood et al. p.90) each other in the creation of the story, giving each other possibilities to make the next climb.

In this project there are two questions I will study in particular.

1. Is *knowledge growth* likely to occur within students who are studying fiction literature with a cooperative approach to learning?
2. Does a cooperative approach to in-class reading of fiction effectively stimulate a *pluralistic viewing* of the text, within the student?

My definition of the term knowledge growth is an accumulation of discursive knowledge over time. My definition of the term pluralistic viewing is a reading experience which conveys a diverse range of views on the literary content.
2. Literary Review

“Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (Johnson & Johnson. *What is Cooperative Learning*, 2017)

This essay emerges from three main concepts: Lev Vygotsky’s social constructive theories, regarding the nature of education; Stephen Krashen’s hypotheses concerning language acquisition; and Lisa Zunshine’s research on the educational benefits of reading fiction.

Furthermore, I have chosen a contemporary novel addressing modern, relevant themes, to base the in-class reading upon. I selected *Behold the Dreamers*, by the Cameroon native author Imbolo Mbue. The main theme in the novel is immigration. It is appropriate as Swedish everyday life in 2017 shares that theme. Therefore, my reason for using this particular novel was that it should appeal to the students’ current interests, since all of them are affected by immigration, and the issues that follow it; issues such as racism, alienation, integration language obstacles, and others.

Lev Vygotsky was a socio-culturally oriented psychologist, who mainly focused on mental illness and children’s educational process. His view on the latter was that knowledge growth takes place when a student is provided with new information by an environment of other students and teachers, possessing a higher level of knowledge. The distance between what a child can learn by her own solitary means, and what she can learn from others who possess a greater competence, was named by Vygotsky as *The Zone of Proximal Development*, or ZPD. With that concept formulated, Vygotsky, long before his time, suggested that students gain knowledge in a social milieu which encourages and supports intellectual expansion; that knowledge growth depends on cooperative efforts and awareness, rather than solitary achievements.
A psychological term, well used in the field of contemporary pedagogy, is the term **Scaffolding**. It is closely connected to the ZPD, and the two concepts are, therefore, often linked together. It was coined and introduced in 1976 by the psychologists David Wood, Jerome S. Bruner and Gail Ross. It can be defined as a “process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which could be beyond his unassisted efforts” (Wood et al. 1976, 90). In the discourse of CL, learners are thus scaffolded by peers or teachers in possession of additional information in order to make knowledge reachable.

Vygotsky looked upon school as an ideal picture of the human learning process, as it mirrors the essence of how we obtain knowledge. To him there was no principal difference between a child staying close to his parents and older siblings, during the agricultural slaughter of lambs, or a child learning to read in the guiding presence of teachers and reading classmates. Society and its progress in all fashions of the word, according to Vygotsky, is based on, and propelled forward by, social interaction; and this to a much larger extent than by the force of individual achievements. With regards to this subject Vygotsky criticizes the German 19th-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of the superman. Nietzsche built his theory upon the idea of a powerful elite individual, a product of the survival of the fittest, who will lead the way for the development of mankind. Vygotsky argues that the biological evolution of man has come to a halt, and, therefore, the history of man will no longer bring forth a new improved species, the way Nietzsche claims. Instead historical evolution, with its built-in materialistic laws of social change, (Note to reader: Vygotsky’s view on this matter is influenced by the theories by Marx and Engels) will determine the development of man, states Vygotsky; and concludes that “Only a raising of all of humanity to a higher level of social life, the liberation of all of humanity, can lead to the formation of a new type of man” (Vygotsky 1994, 182). Thus, spoke Vygotsky; what the collective does together determines the situation for the individual, not the other way around.

Central to Vygotsky’s work is the term **internalization**. It is the name of a process explaining the evolitional relation between the human being and her surrounding culture. Vygotsky argued emphatically that humans experience the world together with others (inter-psychologically) before feeding themselves with that information (intra-psychologically); and when that occurs, a new level of understanding is established cognitively in the individual, but with strong connections to her culture. The individual is **internalized**, for instance, when a
child, firstly, watches older children skipping with a rope, and secondly, interacts with the others, and then submerges the input from the activity in her consciousness, transforming it to a higher level of knowledge. Vygotsky “argued that it is just as crucial, if not more so, to measure the level of potential development as it is to measure the level of actual development” (Wertsch 68). The potential development represents here what a child can achieve with others, while the actual development represents what a child can achieve on her own. An inference from that statement would be, that an assessment of a learner’s individual achievements is not complete until it includes what the learner can achieve in the company of more competent others.

Vygotsky’s posthumous message started to gain attention from American social psychologists in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and whose later academic achievements were influenced by translations of Vygotsky’s work such as Thought and Language (Vygotsky 1962). Their aim was a new direction for social studies of pedagogy, an approach I, hereafter, will name Cooperative Learning or CL.

One of the researchers that studied Vygotsky and applied his theories into a modern context, is the American psychologist Dr. Spencer Kagan, who in 1968 began his studies of cooperative learning structures. His central work, Cooperative Learning (1994), has made a significant impact on applied contemporary pedagogy around the world. This book assembles a number of exercises focusing on positive interdependence between its given participants. Kagan explicitly names the exercises structures. The reason for this is connected to Kagan’s extensive research on conditions for educational enhancements. Kagan suggests that the individual responds primarily to the situation; leading to the conclusion that students’ classroom results above all depend on which kind of situation they are a part of. Hence, the active naming of cooperative classroom tasks as structures, since they work as formation matrixes, to support and guide the students into the ideal learning situation.

Much of Kagan’s research originates from the concern of channeling young learners’ energy in the right direction; something he states is not dealt with properly in traditional learning systems. The available time when the students in a traditional classroom setting can actually make their voices heard in meaningful output is limited and suites the strongest speakers best, while weak learners dwell in silence. According to Kagan, the cooperative classroom setting reduces stress among the speakers; since they produce output collaboratively in a fairly relaxed environment, students are more likely to speak in an intimate setting of peers than in
front of the whole class. Kagan thus highlights that language acquirement achieved in cooperative learning groups by means of output, is of a much greater magnitude, compared to results in traditional classroom settings.

Another of the field’s most prominent researchers is Robert E. Slavin. He argues that CL suits diverse classrooms very well. This is an important result of research for Swedish ESL classrooms, where multi ethnicity and differences in competence levels are ever-present factors. Slavin focuses much of his work on the weaker students, and has found that those students tend to fall short in the traditional classroom, while the strong students are more likely to come out as winners. Slavin writes about competition in a negative sense, describing the traditional classroom metaphorically as a sports arena, where competition is a stimulating factor only for a few. To even out that effect, Slavin considers CL to provide the best means. CL teaches its participants to contribute to the solving of shared problems, to negotiate the way to a common higher end, and prepare them for a working life, which, to a great extent, utilizes the collaborative approach to reach set goals. A clear benefit when CL succeeds is that young learners gain belief in themselves academically, which fosters the development of a strong self-image:

“Perhaps the most important psychological outcome of cooperative learning methods is their effect on student self-esteem. Students’ beliefs that they are valuable and important individuals are of critical importance for their ability to withstand the disappointments of life, to be confident decision makers, and ultimately to be happy and productive individuals.” (Slavin 1995, 60)

Similar evidence (Johnson & Johnson 2017) has been found by psychological researchers David Johnson and Roger Johnson. They argue that before CL was studied and evaluated in schools, the research focus on the field of educational science was applied to the relationship between the teacher and the education material used in the classroom, as well as the relationship between the teacher and the students. However, the connection between students and educational outcomes, had not been studied well enough. Aiming towards the process of students working together, Johnson & Johnson have investigated and narrowed the term interdependence, for educational research purposes. Johnson & Johnson consider social
interdependence theory to be the platform upon which CL rests. Social interdependence theory can be defined as a position stemming from German gestalt psychology in the mid 1900’s claiming that a group is a dynamic whole, affected by its contributing individuals, so that the individual results are products of joint efforts in the group, and the group results are products of individual efforts focusing on a common goal. Hence, “the basic premise of social interdependence theory is that how participants’ goals are structured determines the ways they interact and the interaction pattern determines the outcomes of the situation.” (Johnson & Johnson 2017, 366)

Stephen Krashen’s influential theory about language acquisition bears similarities with Vygotsky’s ZPD. It is well defined in his work *The Natural Approach* under the headline *The Input Hypothesis*: “This hypothesis states simply that we acquire (not learn) language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of (acquired) competence.” (Krashen 1998, 32) The Input Hypothesis bears resemblance to the ZPD in the way both theories espouse that the learner must be exposed to input from above their own competence level, in order to be able to develop further.

Krashen makes a crucial distinction between language *learning* and language *acquisition*. In his context, learning is traditional text-book studies, where the student consciously works with rules and conditions such as those related to syntax and grammar. Language acquirement, though, is, according to Krashen, something we do subconsciously, for instance when we read a novel. When the words radiate from the pages, we are nothing less than subject to the deep impact of language modification. An average reader does not think about the reading process, it is an automatic decoding of messages. Nevertheless, the structures that are consumed are adding to the already existing bank of knowledge, adjusting it to know more. When reading, we are feeding the parts of the central nervous system with examples of accuracy, a programming process we are not aware of. Compared to language *learning*, we cannot identify the details in the progress we just made when reading a book or a news article. We will probably recognize the advancement over time, but we are not able to explain exactly which grammatical rule or spelling feature we know better, or how we *acquired* it. We have gained a better feel for the language, while, when dealing with language *learning*, we work with particular areas of language, such as irregular verbs, and can, therefore, follow our progress on the actual matter. A vital part of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis is that language is acquired only in a setting of *comprehensible input*, where “new words are acquired when they
are heard in an utterance or in a sentence that is comprehensible” (Krashen 1998, 156). Another aspect on Krashen’s view of language acquisition, important for this essay, is his Affective Filter Hypothesis. By that Krashen proposes, that, for the acquisition to take place, the affective filter needs to be at lowered status, which means that learners must have high self-esteem and low levels of anxiety in order to succeed in their language acquisition.

The American English professor Lisa Zunshine has a research focus on the cognitive and linguistic enhancements due to reading fiction. She states that reading in general is important for language development and knowledge growth, which is in line with the traditional opinion that reading contributes to language development. However, reading fiction, in particular, she argues, trains its readers in a meta-conceptive fashion; that is, getting to know how, for example, a protagonist in a novel is thinking: “The reader knows that Romeo does not know that Juliet lies drugged, not dead.” (“Why Fiction” 2013, B5). Zunshine uses the established psychological concept Theory of Mind, also known as mind reading, when she discusses her view on reading fiction and how it affects its consumers cognitively. She declares that “research in developmental psychology […] correlates children’s vocabulary with the development of their ‘theory of mind’, also known as ‘mind reading’ - that is, their ability to explain their own and other people’s behavior as caused by mental states, such as thoughts, desires and feelings.” (“The Secret Life” 2015, 724) She claims that reading fiction is unique in providing a high exposure to these complexities; that fiction literature contains unprecedented features compared to non-fictional texts, which “don’t come close to containing the metacognitive complexity so essential to fiction that we don’t even notice it.” (“Why Fiction” 2013, B5). Zunshine explains that this exposure is not only a matter of readers acquiring fictional characters’ thoughts and emotions, but is essentially about drawing inferences from those characters’ choices, in order to understand the narrative and make future assumptions about the reading. These inferences have an immensely important function of helping the reader simulate the causes and effects of human life. It can thus be derived from Zunshine’s work, that fiction has a superior quality, which enables a training of our meta-conscious thinking, and which is crucial for successful studies at higher school level. This conception is one of the cornerstones of this essay. Another fundamental part of it is Krashen’s theories on language acquisition; how reading unconsciously modifies the reader’s mind to, over time, gain larger pieces of vocabulary and master deeper linguistic complexity.
In conclusion, significant ideas concerning social structures and learning will be presented in this review. Vygotsky has influenced many researchers in the field of educational science and psychology with his ideas claiming that individuals consume information from their collective surroundings, learn from it, and apply the new knowledge into higher psychological structures within themselves in an internalization process. Influenced by that, researchers such as Kagan have developed structures for successful cooperative work in classrooms. Similar findings were achieved by Slavin, and are presented in this study. Slavin’s results can be summarized as being a focus on a strengthening of confidence among young people when taking part in cooperative learning. The same conclusion is shared by Johnson & Johnson, who present the anatomy of pedagogical group work, using crucial terms such as positive interdependence, to explain how the dynamics in a team function.

2.1. Plot summary of *Behold the Dreamers*

I decided to give a literary focus to my exercises during the two sessions with the students. I decided to use a novel with contemporary relevant themes, which could appeal, motivate, and engage as many young people as possible. Therefore, I chose Imbolo Mbue’s debut novel *Behold the Dreamers*. The novel describes the life of the couple Jende and Neni Jonga and their son Liomi, as they try to fight for a sweet spot in American society, whilst living in New York as immigrants from the west African country Cameroon. The Jonga family is contrasted to the life of another family, the Edwards. The Edwards are a privileged, white, Upper Manhattan family. The relation between the two families is at first strictly professional. However, when the financial empire of the bank Lehman Brothers is collapsing the two couples are heavily affected, and inevitable choices are made which lead to consequences impossible to foresee by the drama’s participants. The main themes in the novel are immigration, alienation, injustice and the quest for a life of prosperity. The couple at the center of the narrative, Mr. and Mrs. Jonga, are struggling not only to achieve material goals, but also to find their true selves, so they can walk through life with a posture of dignity and
proudness. They try to produce an identity unbound of traditions and origin, so that they can master their lives in a way that suites them best. Hence, the Jongas are following a postmodern path in search of a new self, but wind up as victims of an American capitalist culture, which threatens to destroy their heartfelt sense of love and culture. When they finally see themselves reflected in the display windows of main stream consumerism, they can truly understand how they must live their family life, and how prosperity really should be defined.

3. Methodology

During two sessions, on the 28th of September and the 2nd of October 2017, with an ESL class consisting of social- and behavioral science students, at an upper secondary school in Halmstad, I have collected primary data from collaboratively oriented exercises. The study investigates if knowledge growth is likely to be successful when working in cooperative learning structures. It also aims to discover if students experience a wider spectrum of aspects of the story and characters, when working with the text in cooperative learning structures, compared to working with traditional reading exercises. In this section I will review the content of the lessons in chronological order.

3.1. Students’ Introduction and Ethics

Initially I introduced myself and told the students about my project. I also held a brief lecture about the theories that have inspired my essay. I told them about Lev Vygotsky, and his posthumous contribution to modern pedagogy; that his theories of The Zone of Proximal development and Internalization have had an immense influence on cooperative learning methods. Furthermore, I enlightened the students about Stephen Krashen’s theories on reading in general and his Input Hypothesis, in particular. From Krashen’s assumptions that voluntary reading consumed behind a low affective filter is the best way for acquisition of language, it is not far to Lisa Zunshine’s statement that reading fiction trains the reader’s mind.
to process complex information. I informed the students about the ideas above, to give them a scholarly framework to the exercises they were about to partake in.

To collect the data, I chose to record the students’ voices during their classroom work. Although a visual recording of the events would serve the purpose of collecting data even better, considering how much communication is transferred by means of body language, I chose not to use that media. Such a level of documentation demands several cameras, and people to operate them; that would be too big of an operation for me to carry out. However, I informed the students about the recording and explained that the material assembled was for the purpose of academic use only; and that, in my editing of the voice-recordings for the essay, I would leave out names and gender, so that the individual utterances cannot be traced back to the person who produced it.

3.2. The Structures

The first exercise was of a pre-reading nature and was chosen to get the students together in a relaxed way, and to stimulate their English-speaking abilities. It is called Quiz-Quiz-Trade (Kagan 2017, 98) and is a cooperative mingle game designed by Spencer Kagan. Each student was given a card with a question printed on it, loosely linked to a theme in Behold the Dreamers. Some examples of the questions were: “Define freedom”; “What is a green card in the U.S.A.”; “Which prominent leader has recently been talking about ‘The dreamers’?”. When a pair was finished asking each other, they swapped their cards and went looking for new partners on the classroom floor. The students took an active part in the quiz game, resulting in new knowledge gathered among them. Because of the chaotic nature of the mingle game, I did not record it.

The lesson of the day ended with another pre-reading exercise, where the students had to read, or listen to my voice reading, a one-page biography of the author of Behold the Dreamers, as well as a short description of the novel. After the short reading, the students elaborated the text with a structure called RoundRobin, (Kagan 2017, 134) which is a simple structure that can be used in many contexts, and is designed by Spencer Kagan. It revolves
around a given subject, in this case the biography, and the students respond to it by taking turns giving their opinion or knowledge of the matter. Someone in the small group of preferably two to five participants starts explaining what she knows, while the others in the group listen. When the next student follows, she can add what has not yet been said and complete a bit of information that was not clear to her until she heard the previous speaker express it. This is the very function and essence of cooperative learning structures: the accumulated knowledge within the group is a container of information, and as its members put their heads together, following the instructed steps of the structure, they can and will take part of the content of that container. The RoundRobin structure was a good warm up for the students, before moving on to more complex team work.

The next session took place a few days later. It started with me repeating the main ideas of my introduction in the beginning of the first lesson, to inculcate in the students a stronger sense of purpose regarding the coming activities.

The second recorded exercise was based on a reading of four pages from the novel *Behold the Dreamers*, concerning a job interview at Lehman Brothers, New York. One of the main characters in the novel, Mr. Edwards, an executive at the bank, wants to hire a private chauffeur, someone who can drive him between his job and home, as well as his sons and wife to various places. When the novel’s main protagonist, Mr. Jonga, comes to see Mr. Edwards at his office he is dressed in a cheap suit with a clip-on tie, he has no green card, and his only professional driver’s experience is as a New York taxi driver; hence, he is very nervous and submissive. I instructed the students to read the part while I read it aloud, just to make sure that everyone was consuming the text at the same pace.

Furthermore, a structure called Character Circle Map took place. I modulated this well-known structure to focus the students on character analysis. Since there was limited time set out for the actual reading of the novel, I decided that discussions about characters was the most accessible field to start with. A blank paper was handed out, with the instruction to draw three circles on it. In the inner circle, drawn inside the second largest circle, which in turn was drawn in the largest circle, the students were told to, individually, write a sentence depicting what they had extracted as the main character’s core qualities. With that task completed, the students got together in pairs to add one another’s characteristics within the second circle. To fill in the space in the last, or largest, circle, the students gathered in groups of three to five people and wrote down all they had collected regarding personal features of Mr. Jonga. Before
I went on to next exercise, I asked each group to produce their best sentence describing Mr. Jonga’s personality. The purpose of the Character Circle Map is to effectively illustrate different readings on a character’s traits. Since those traits are made visible for the group members in the last stage of the structure, the members can easily access the variety of readings, which is what I want to examine in the second research question of this essay. For instance, student X may have detected sadness in the expressions of a fictional character; while student Y may have detected anger when reading about the same character. When highlighting those emotional attributes together, and writing them down on paper, a platform for literary discussion is created. Hence, the participants will find out that more than one interpretation of a fictional character is not only possible, but also beneficial for one’s deeper analysis of real and fictional characters. Lisa Zunshine claims that when we are reading fiction, we are developing “theory of mind—a capacity to attribute mental states, including thoughts, beliefs, and desires, to oneself and other people. (“Why Fiction” B4). Thinking about characters together in a group of readers is a task contributive to one another’s theory of mind: The students help each other to create a visualization of a complex character, and perhaps also an understanding of that character.

Moreover, I once more handed out a four pages long excerpt from the novel, and read it aloud to make sure everybody was on the same track. This part of the novel concerned Jende’s wife, Neni and their son, Liomi, attending a parent-teacher conference at Liomi’s school. After the reading, I wrote three columns on the white board, headed by the terms “Adjective”, “Noun” and “Verb”. The students were directed to write one word each, in one of the columns; a word from any of the three word-classes on the board that they either picked up from the text during reading and which could relate to Neni, her son and his teacher; or whichever one-word detail that came to mind by association from that part of the novel. When everyone had written their word, enough material to construct a large number of sentences had been collected on the white board. The students were asked to sit in groups and collaboratively construct sentences with the use of the white board word bank. The sentences had to relate to the situation in the novel and could contain elements such as articles, pronouns, conjunctions and prepositions, in order to create full and more modified sentences. The groups had to pick one favorite sentence out of the ones they had created and have a member from each group read this sentence aloud in the class. Aside from the obvious
benefits of practicing written output, the students had to come up with words, and later, sentences thematically fitting the part they read. By experiencing their peers’ chosen words from the reading, and collaboratively assembling them into sentences, the students were aided in memorizing the part, thus helping them to gain a more solid sense of the story than their individual memory-process is likely to have done.

3.3. Students’ Feedback

“I think it’s good to work with others because you view things from more perspectives.”

Student participating in the study

A few days after the sessions, the students were asked to answer two questions in relation to their experience of the exercises. I received answers back from all the 27 participants.

Question 1:

Do you think there are educational benefits with this method, compared to other learning methods you know?

The majority, 20 students, were generally positive about the method. From those who returned the feedback in detail, seven students highlighted the supportive discussion with group members as the most significant benefit of the method; six students emphasized the addition of new perspectives when working together; four students claimed knowledge growth as a positive consequence when working in pairs or groups.

The seven students who were negative to the method did not specify the reason for their views. A mere hint among the answers suggests that it is to do with lack of individual focus on the text in a group setting, but it cannot be stated for certain.
Question 2:

Do you think that this method can increase your motivation to read more books?

From this question, the number of students who left a positive answer equals the number who left a negative answer. There were no substantial reasons given as to why they responded the way they did. Seven of the students did obviously not understand the second question; hence, their answers were left out. Those students who did not understand the second question did probably not make the connection between the concept of cooperative learning and voluntary reading of fiction. I draw the conclusion that those students are far from used to thinking in terms of cause and effect, or what could possibly make them read books.

Following this section is a figure showing the result from the survey in box format.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions asked to 27 students</th>
<th>Generally positive</th>
<th>Generally negative</th>
<th>Supportive group discussions</th>
<th>Perspectives</th>
<th>Knowledge growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. Educational benefits?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. This method can increase your motivation to read more books?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4. Analysis of Voice Recordings from the Two Lessons

The voice recordings presented here are a selection from a larger body of recordings. The first exercise to be recorded was the second pre-reading exercise, the RoundRobin structure. Here I want to focus on knowledge growth provided by supportive group members. The first transcription below is an example of this:

3.4.1. Recording 1

Student 1: Ok, I remember that she was the author of Behold the Dreamers...
Student 2: And that she was an African immigrant, that came to the U.S. 1998...
Student 3: I remember that her book is informed by the experience of being an Africa citizen...and the experience of the many African immigrants that she knows...
Student 4: Her book is about the fall of the Lehman Brothers bank and two couples and their son...
Student 3: Yes, and you?... (Urging another student to speak.)
Student 5: I remember... I remember... sorry [giggling]. I remember that she was the author of behold the dreamers...eh... that was a chart seventeen... eh... Oprah’s book club... eh... contest... she was the winner of the contest... eh... on the PEN award. After her debut was read... a Jacqueline Woodson remarked: ‘Who is this Imbolo Mbue? And where has she... where has she been hiding?’ Eh... and many many other people has been... she has been asked that question from many people.”
Student 3: Yes, finished. (Stops recording.)

In this example the students are filling in what the others are missing. You can tell by the disciplined way they do it, that they are used to working together, completing the weave almost seamlessly. In the next recording, taken from another group’s collaboration, the students receive support from the teacher, who asks them questions when they are stuck, thereby revealing more information than they knew they had.
3.4.2. Recording 2

Student 1: Eh, I think that I remember is that Mbue write a book about Jonga and Neni, and then their...they had an American dream and their situation improved when Neni start to work, and eh... she also start to work as chauffeur, I think... and eh, yeah, that is all I remember.

Teacher: Good, then you can fill in what he is missing etcetera.

Student 2: Yeah...in the beginning then I remember then speaking about or winning some award...I don't know exactly what it was, but some award for her book (other students confirming by nodding their heads), yeah, that's what I remember that he didn't say (referring back to previous speaker), yeah.

Student 3 to teacher: They said it.

Student 4 to teacher: They said it all.

Student 3, 4: [giggling] “Yeah, they did.

Teacher: No, I don’t believe they did. I am sure there is something more.

Student 3: (in a passive tone) No...

Teacher: Let’s sort it out: You know... Jende was the male... in the family. He was the chauffeur, and Neni was his, eh... wife, and she was working as a household help. So that’s... yeah. And then... did they have any children, for example, or something like that?

Student 1: They had one son.

Teacher: Yes, that’s right, good.

Student 3: I don’t remember.

Teacher: (encouraging) Try to help...

Student 2: ...And Neni worked as a household too, I think.

Teacher: Yes, she did, that's right. So, try to help each other remembering... maybe together you can deliver a story that is better than the individual [one]... that’s the purpose.

Student 4: (soft tone) Yeah.

Teacher: OK.

As described above, the students exercised the structure Character Circle Map after the reading about Mr. Jende and his meeting with Mr. Edwards. When they had completed that individually and in pairs, they formed groups to compare and contrast their results. With this
structure, my ambition was to examine if the students can explore more perspectives on the character, than they picked up from their own reading. Here is one example:

3.4.3. Recording 3

Student 1: So, what do you think of Jende? (Addressing everyone attendant.)
Student 1: He was very kind, and a nervous person.
Student 1: What do you think? (nodding to student 2.)
Student 2: He was nervous!
Student 1: Yes, I already said that...
Student 2: Ehh... he was ambitious and driven and loyal.
Student 3: And insecure and hardworking...
Student 2: And it felt like he was kind, too...
Student 4: His family can depend on him. He has a strong character and dependability. He is very kind.

In this kind of discussion, it is common that a few adjectives are repeated, such as “kind” and “nervous”. Nevertheless, the students have picked up different qualities reading about the character, and when they are entering a group discussion they are also creating a diversity of character attributes. From those new perspectives they might be able to behold the character in new light, making the portrait richer, more detailed, and more complex.

Another group focuses on the vulnerability of the protagonist, Mr. Jende:
3.4.4. Recording 4

Student 1: *Jende is not very confident, and is easy to take advantage of. So, he is desperate, like he is in desperate need of the job, and he is easy to take advantage of, because... like he has no strong personality? ...and then he is not very confident.*

Teacher: Questions, boys?

Student 1: *(Demanding tone.) Did you write anything?*

Student 2: *(Postures up and stops goofing.) Yeah! *He is insecure. He is hard working. And he is actually kind, and he is honest.*

In summary, the recorded students firstly participated in a structure called RoundRobin. In that exercise they took turns to tell each other what they remembered from the reading of the biography. When the group members heard each other tell details from the text that they had not absorbed, they could use their peers’ contributions to complete their own piece of output, and thus learned more according to the theory of *The Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky, p. 86). The other structure that was recorded was the Character Circle Map, which is designed to display different views of a character, so that students can experience and learn new aspects about the character in focus.

4.0 Discussion

The recorded students were used to working in groups, and made smooth transitions to group formation when it was called for. As elucidated in the literary review, students increase their output in CL-structures (Kagan) because the speakers have more time to share than they have in full class speech performances. Also, the speakers in small groups have generally lower *affective filters* (Krashen), compared to when they speak in a full class setting. However, to reach the ideal state of a rich output evenly transmitted between group members takes time
and practice. Some of the students were hindered from releasing their full potential performance by common teenage issues, such as fear of making mistakes or exposing themselves to others. Nervous behavior was displayed in different ways: by silence, or reluctance to provide output for the group; by the use of provocative and mocking language, and immature acts opposing the instructions. Nevertheless, a teacher well-grounded in the CL-theories, who persistently works with those methods, will arguably monitor better results over time, than I did in my two short sessions.

4.1. Scaffolding by Peers

An obvious quality that can be heard in the recordings is the way students are scaffolding each other when working towards a common goal. In the review from recording 4, a complex main character emerges in the protagonist Jende, outlined by his motivational profile of strengths and weaknesses. The students negotiate reciprocally his values and qualities, helping each other to remember and better understand the content of the text, as well as one another’s individual findings. In this and other recordings from the classroom sessions, it is clearly exhibited “that each group member may have skills and knowledge other group members may not have, and by making a joint effort, they can complement and build on each other’s skills and knowledge.” (Tanaka & Sanchez 2016, 3). The participants in the CL structures are stimulating each other’s output, sometimes implicitly by simply nodding during or after a student’s review, sometimes explicitly, as in this example from recording 4:

Student 1: (Demanding tone.) Did you write anything?

Student 2: (Postures up and stops goofing.) Yeah! He is insecure. He is hard working. And he is actually kind, and he is honest.
4.2. Increasing Output

Kagan suggests that students modulate their output depending on the situation, for example, they speak more artificially in full class, when answering the teacher, than they do in the generally more relaxed setting of a small group of peers: “The cooperative group provides the arena for expressive, functional, personally relevant, representative language output that is critical for language acquisition.” (Kagan 3). This idea of the benefits of a smaller stage for language performance, is tightly connected to Krashen’s theory of affective filters. He claims that, for the language acquirement to be successful, the students need to be free from anxiety and stress, or in other words, have a low affective filter: “A low filter means that the performer is more ‘open’ to the input...” (Krashen 38). The Affective Filter Hypothesis is certainly implementable also regarding output, which brings this discussion back to Kagan again, where he states: “The single greatest advantage of cooperative learning over traditional classroom organization for the acquisition of language is the amount of language output allowed per student.” (Kagan 3). That is, learners have plenty of time to speak while working with the structures, since all of them are designed to rely on communication. The performers of the recorded CL-sessions in this study did well in taking turns following the structures almost mechanically. The output volume varied between the students, and the level of stringency and serious attitude varied as well, but they followed the rules and contributed, all in their own way.

4.3. Role Play

The Cooperative learning structures operate often as role plays, with a built-in mechanism that can only function if the actors play their parts. Therefore, in CL, the individual will not succeed without the group’s joint effort. One example is jig-saw reading, where learners study one part each of a text, to be individually proficient in one aspect each of information, so that they can inform each other from their special corner of the picture, to make it sufficiently
whole, and make the total knowledge from the text accessible and transactable among all group members.

In the study of the learners at the school where I executed the study, groups took different shapes depending on the individuals’ levels of motivation, knowledge, skills and energy. These varied parameters worked out differently in every group depending on the combination of them and what that caused. Equally important is by how well the members of the groups overcame the obstacles each individual produced; how well they dealt with emotional issues like diversity, presuppositions, unfriendliness, etcetera; and how well they focused on the goal: Play by the script, in order to mutually carry ashore the solution of an intellectual task, and earn the profits of knowledge.

4.4 Social Benefits of CL

In every cooperative structure there should be a sign saying “under construction” as the interaction between students always implies more knowledge, deeper understanding and more facilitating of each other’s linguistic development. The common project takes form within the boundary of the group. It has a social agenda, as well as an intellectual one. The group cannot reach the goal with one student’s effort alone. It is easy to hear on the recordings, as in the example below, that students are being instructed by their team mates to do the work properly, for everyone’s benefit.

Student 1: (Inaudible mocking of the author’s name.)

Student 2: X, stop it!

Student 1: Imbolo Mbue has written a book about a family migrating to New York.

Accordingly, the students are training themselves for participating in formal meeting situations; skills with important democratic content, clearly connected to the policy of The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, Participation... 2016).
4.5 Team Work

As Slavin, so wisely has explained, the traditional approach to learning is an individual sport, an environment where the strong students prosper, and the weak students perish. Cooperative learning, in contrast, may be compared with a team sport: “All cooperative learning methods share the idea that students work together to learn and are responsible for their teammates’ learning as well as their own” (Slavin 1995, 5). This function in cooperative structures in motion, is plain to recognize in field surveys like the one conducted in this essay, such as in this example from the same session as before:

Recording 5

*Student 1: How it feels to be an immigrant? Maybe it’s hard because he [Mr. Jende] has to learn...*

*Student 2: ...To speak...*

*Student 1: Yeah, to learn the language, to...*

*Student 3: ...Learn to live in that country, how to get the money...*

*Student 1: Yeah, you have to get money to do everything... Yeah, you have to learn how the country works... eh, everything.*

*Student 2: Rules are different in different countries.*

In this example, the students are clearly scaffolding each other in order to make the theme consistent. The students themselves would probably say that they only tried to complete an unfinished speech act. Nevertheless, the result is that everyone learned more about the specific content discussed, while they mutually constructed functional messages. This process can be compared to moving a ball between the hands of basketball players, in order to reach the goal and drop it in the basket.
4.6 Teacher’s Scaffolding

An issue that might occur in CL, is that a student might sometimes be stuck on his or her task, and the peers do not yet have the competence to help him or her out. On such occasions the student needs to be scaffolded by her teacher. Here is an example from the recorded exercises showing this kind of teacher scaffolding:

Recording 6

*Teacher (addressing all four group members):* “Did you find any *reasons* to why Mr. Jende is acting his way?”

*Student 1:* No…

*Student 2:* He hasn’t got his green card yet.

*Teacher:* Yeah, good. *So*…

*Student 3:* He really wants the job

*Teacher:* *He really wants the job - good.* So, there you have something. *What’s the reasons behind his actions?*

*Student 1,2 (in chorus):* Ahaa…

*Teacher:* *You know, that you can talk about.* Someone didn’t drop him from the sky like that; *he came there for a reason.*

An important part of a teacher’s daily classroom work is to foster students’ thought processes. Sometimes a teacher must support a student with a B, (if the letters here are representing knowledge steps) when the student produces an A, but has C within reach. It could also be expressed that “scaffolding refers to doing the strategy with the students. The teacher may say, ‘Let’s work together on questioning with this text,’ and then proceed to join the students in forming questions that will help them learn” (Guthrie 2003, 117).
4.7 Monitoring

The teacher’s function in CL is of an actively supervising nature. The teacher is monitoring the groups one by one; a convenient task, since the content of the monitoring is quite graspable, well-defined by the simple rules of the structure, and the clear roles the small number of participants are playing. During the lessons in the class in focus of this study, the transparency of participation was an obvious advantage when listening to the group discussions; it was clear to see who was making an effort and who was not. It is well known that proficient readers are actively using reading comprehension strategies. Some of those strategies are on the display when a group of students are working with a text in a CL-structure. The teacher has immediate access to the dialogue between the group members, and can support them with strategically asked questions, to facilitate the flow of the process. By having the students working in small teams facing each other in problem solving motivation mode, “teachers can conduct many simultaneous lessons and address a broader range of students’ academical needs. Research in the elementary grades shows that children’s reading competence improves when they work with each other in a cooperative and structured manner” (Fuchs & Fuchs 2007; 176,177).

However, the teacher’s responsibility towards the students is not of lesser importance in a CL-context than in a traditional one, and issues regarding teachers’ bullying and offensive behavior is always and everywhere it occurs a serious matter. The latest PISA study, which was performed in 2015, but published November 2017, shows an interesting aspect related to teacher monitoring. It declares that, “on average across OECD countries, students who reported that their teachers say something insulting to them in front of others at least a few times per year score 23 points lower in collaborative problem solving.” (OECD 147) Accordingly, monitoring CL-students, which includes intimate feedback and various strategies to foster dialogue development, is a mission that must be carried out by an empathetic teacher.
5. Conclusion

This essay investigated a cooperative approach to in-class reading of fiction literature in a Swedish, upper secondary, ESL-class. Due to the limited time available for the operation, the classroom sessions were conducted to let the students’ reading exercises mainly focus on character analysis. Data from these lessons were collected in two formats: First, voice recordings. The students were recorded when working in teams with the reading exercises. The findings from an analysis of the voice recordings support the research questions; the recorded students displayed knowledge growth when working with a common task. They furthermore showed support for the gain of a wider spectrum concerning fictional characters, when working in groups. The second format for collecting of data was a survey. The students answered broadly formulated questions regarding their cooperative learning experience. A convincingly large number of the students answered, without knowing the research questions of this essay, that specifically knowledge growth and multi-perspective insights are clear benefits when working with CL in literature classes. It is of significant value that the very answers to this essay’s research questions come from students who, most likely, do not cultivate academic awareness around their own learning methods.

Regarding multi-perspective insights when reading together, a comment must be made in this conclusion. There was no text written by any of the field’s scholars to be found that distinctly supports my thesis; albeit, it is an aspect of the field of reading comprehension that definitely deserves further research work. Due to a limited time spent with the primary data collection in the classroom, this essay is merely scratching the surface of this aspect of reading and discussion fiction in small groups.

This essay stems from concerns about what might happen to young ESL speakers’ minds if they don’t receive a thorough reading education. Two very strong arguments for investing seriously in fiction reading in schools are highlighted in this essay’s literary review. The first, is the linguistic phenomena of Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, which declares reading to be the most powerful contribution to second language development. The second, is Zunshine’s socio-cognitively focused literary science research results, which conclude reading fiction to be a unique enhancer of our humanistic understanding of the other. ESL teachers can use the
message from these researchers, together with the results emerging from this essay concerning the benefits of working structuralized in groups with reading fiction, for a narrative guidance of their students’ discoveries of the English language.
6. Works Cited


Peter Larsson