

Interconnected literacy practices: exploring classroom work with literature in adult second language education

Robert Walldén

Malmö University, Sweden (robert.wallden@mau.se)

Abstract

Previously, there has been little research conducted on how teachers and adult second language learners negotiate the challenge of reading authentic novels in the target language. This qualitative classroom study explores literacy practices in adult intermediate second language instruction, involving two teachers and their diverse student groups over four weeks of work with literature. The material has been generated during weekly book discussions, through observations, voice recordings and the collection of texts and other teaching materials. The result shows a strong orientation towards meaning-making, which was scaffolded by the teachers directing attention to language, style and narrative structure. Thus, different kinds of literacy practices were interconnected. Although practices of critical text analysis were not prioritised by the participant teachers, it is shown how the students used their diverse experiences and knowledge to read both 'with' and 'against' the grain of the text. Implications for teaching and steering documents are discussed.

Keywords: Adult education, critical literacy, second language instruction, reader-response, teaching literature

Introduction

In this article, I explore classroom work with literature which involves two teachers and their students within adult second language education. Previous research has shown the potential for language development in reading literature (Krashen, 1985, 2013; Mason, 2013; Yousefi & Biria, 2018), how literature can play a part in transforming the perspective of adult learners (Mezirow, 1996; Janks, 2010; Jarvis, 2012; King, 2000; see also Hoggan, 2016; Taylor & Cranton, 2013) and in reclaiming radical perspectives on learning and citizenship (Gouthro & Holloway, 2013). There are also studies on the reading of literature in contexts where adults study language and literature out of interest



(Carroli, 2011; Saal & Dowell, 2014). However, there is little research on how literacy practices are shaped in diverse groups of migrants primarily studying the second language out of necessity and who have little previous experience of reading novels in the target language.

While issues of emancipation and critical literacy have often been foregrounded in research on adult education (discussed in Ackland, 2014; Galloway, 2015), a broader perspective of literacy practices is used in the present study. I will explore how two novels are used, analysed, criticised and made meaningful in municipal adult education, through teacher-supported and teacher-directed interaction.

In an article based on the same material (Walldén, 2019), I highlight how one of the participating teachers, Anita, used language-focused discussions to direct attention to characteristics of the protagonist of novel. In the present article, I draw upon a larger part of the material, exploring two classroom works with literature in their entirety.

The purpose of the study is to explore literacy practices during classroom work with literature in intermediate adult second language education. The following questions are asked: What range of literacy practices can be seen during the classroom work? How can the relationship between these practices be understood? And what priorities in instruction and learning do the literacy practices reflect?

Exploring literacy practices

The analytical framework employed in this study is based on Freebody and Luke's families of literacy practices (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999), enabling the study of a wide range of literacy practices where reading is seen as a social and situated activity rather than a generic skill (e.g. Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Canning, 2013; Gee, 1990; Street, 1984, 1995). The more specific categories of *meaning-making*, *text use*, *text analysis* and *code breaking* have, inspired by literacy and reader-response theories, been formulated in dialogue with the material generated during this study (see Table 1 and below).

Table 1: Literacy practices (reworked from Luke & Freebody, 1999)

<p>Meaning-making practices: understanding the text</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding words, expressions and figurative language in the text as well as reconstructing the plot • Understanding the novel on a more abstract level: themes motifs, symbols etc. • Describing, evaluating, judging and relating to the characters • Making connections to personal experience, prior knowledge and other texts 	<p>Text user practices: using the text for different goals and purposes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the book to get information, for example about language, culture and society • Using the book in a way which is highly valued in the educational context
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<p>Text analyst practices: objectifying the text</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing personal opinions about the text • Analysing and evaluating the text as a literary piece of art and craftsmanship • Examining and criticising representations of people and cultures 	<p>Code breaker practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decoding the technology of written language: reading direction, the relationship between letters and sounds, the alphabet etc. • Decoding conventions for presenting texts, such as orthography and visual organisation
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Freebody and Luke view these as non-sequential practices which rely upon each other (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Therefore, the relationship between these practices will be explored. This is something which has not been sufficiently attended to in other models outlining different ‘stances’ to texts (cf. Langer, 1995/2017; Lee, 2013; Leland, Ociepka, & Kuonen, 2012).

The practices of *meaning-making* are a broad family, comprising reconstructing the plot as well as describing, evaluating and relating to the characters. Jarvis (2012) has discussed how lifelike qualities of fiction can transform adult learners’ perspectives by invoking empathy. Meaning-making also involves making connections to the adult learners’ prior knowledge and experiences (e.g. Mezirow, 1991, 1996). A potential meaning-making category which was not prioritised in the studied classroom works is understanding the novels on a more abstract or symbolic level, with attention to features such as themes and motifs (e.g. Lee, 2013). Practices of *text use* involve using the text for purposes outside the text, for example, learning about language or culture. These can be seen as instances of *effeient* reading, using the texts as containers of information rather than for enjoyment or other aesthetic purposes (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 24). Such reductive use of literature is often criticised from a second language perspective (e.g. Carroli, 2011, p. 9-13). However, Freebody and Luke (1990) have also highlighted how texts are used to achieve institutional goals. The adult second language learners are not merely facing a language barrier; they also need to learn how literature is studied and talked about in the cultural context of Swedish adult municipal education. Therefore, the kind of text use prioritised by the teachers will be discussed.

As for *text analysis*, Freebody and Luke have stressed the sociopolitical dimension of literacy: how representations in texts could be shaped by power relations (e.g. Freire, 1974; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1990; Janks, 2010; Leland et al., 2012; Street, 1984). In multicultural and heterogenous groups of adult students, such as those participating in the present study, it is reasonable to assume that the students have knowledge, experiences and values which may position them to read either with or against the ‘grain of the text’ (Janks, 2010, p. 185; Jarvis, 2012, p. 496-497). In addition, text analysis can involve objectifying the text, by directing attention to aspects such as language and narrative structure, or by giving personal opinions on the novel (e.g. Langer, 1995/2017, p. 41-42; Lee, 2013, p. 144-145). From a second language perspective, Carroli (2011, p. 24-25) has emphasised the potential for connecting grammatical features to literary style. Finally, *code breaker* practices concern understanding and making use of the technology of written language such as orthography and the visual organisation of text.

Literacy practices in the course syllabus and the national curriculum

While text analytical practices are often advocated in research on literacy education, particularly in relation to adult learners, this perspective is not foregrounded in the syllabus of Swedish as a Second Language in basic adult education (Skolverket, 2017). It closely resembles the syllabus for compulsory schooling, which has been noted as lacking a critical sociopolitical perspective on literacy (Liberg, Wiksten Folkeryd & af Geijerstam, 2012). Regarding fiction, it is stated that teaching based on literature should be directed towards the ‘message, linguistic features and typical structure’ and ‘how literary texts can be structured by introduction, course of events and conclusion’ (Skolverket, 2017, my translations). There are also many wordings in the syllabus relating to linguistic skills which literature could be used to promote, such as vocabulary, morphology and syntax. In the assessment criteria, ‘comprehension’ is foregrounded, relating mostly to meaning-making practices. Overall, critical stances do not seem to be required. However, in the national curriculum, there are goals conducive to the advancement of critical reflection and transformational learning (cf. Mezirow, 2003) such as promoting the possibilities for ‘democratic participation’ and fostering the ability to ‘critically evaluate and judge what she or he sees, hears or reads’ (Skolverket, 2012, my translations). Given the absence of similar wordings in the syllabus, combined with the lack of dedicated training for teachers in adult municipal education (discussed in Fejes, 2019), critical capabilities are less likely to be prioritised in teaching.

Method and material

This section describes the participants, material, methods and ethical considerations of the study.

Participants and background information

The study involves two teachers and their respective groups of second language learners. The relevant course is Swedish as a second language in basic municipal adult education (see Skolverket, n.d., 2017). As the course is normally a progression from initial Swedish Tuition for Immigrants, the linguistic level will be referred to as intermediate. Generally, the course is studied to qualify for more advanced courses required for university studies conducted in Swedish.

For ethical reasons (see further below), no specific information was collected about the students’ backgrounds and previous reading experiences. However, it can generally be stated that the student groups are heterogenous in terms of home country, first language, age, educational background and proficiency in the target language. According to the teachers, their experiences of reading literature in any language vary widely. Most of them are female. The two teachers participating in the study, Anita and Eva, have worked as teachers for close to 30 and 15 years respectively, almost exclusively within municipal adult education. Anita has a teaching degree for upper secondary school, for the teaching of Swedish and history, while Eva has a degree for teaching Swedish, English and social studies in primary school. As adult learning is sidelined in Swedish teacher training (discussed in Fejes, 2019), the teachers have mainly developed their teaching of adults through experience. However, both have completed additional education for teaching Swedish as a second language. Teaching this subject to adult learners has been their focus during the last decade.

Generation of material, ethical considerations and analysis

The material of this study was generated over two months through observations, voice recordings (50 hours) and collected teaching materials. The work with literature in both classes lasted for about four weeks, and the data was mostly collected during weekly discussions where parts of the novels were followed up. The recommendations of the Swedish Research Council (2017) have been observed. Consequently, I carefully described the nature and purpose of the research—making appropriate allowances for the students' expected level of proficiency in Swedish—before collecting written consent from both the teachers and the students. The names of the students and the teachers used in the article are pseudonyms.

The voice recordings were transcribed (around 200 A4 pages) and coded according to the analytical framework previously described. This entailed reading the transcripts through, giving attention to the specified practices of meaning-making, text use, text analysis and code breaking, while referencing the texts the communication was based upon. The interactions were translated from Swedish to English, with Swedish expressions, words or morphemes in italics when deemed necessary. Some characteristics of learner language have been preserved, such as omitted words and other issues of syntax. In the transcripts, 'T' denotes the teacher and 'S' the student (if they are not named). Also, parentheses denote unsure transcriptions while '(x)' replaces words impossible to decode from the recordings. Finally, capital letters are used for metacomments.

Novels and activities during the classroom work

Below follows a brief description of the novels used in the classroom work (see Table 2). The Swedish titles are in brackets.

Table 2: Novels used in classroom work

	Anita's classroom work	Eva's classroom work
Novel	<i>Soft in the Head</i> [<i>Eftermiddagarna med Margueritte</i>] by Marie-Sabine Roger. Original French title: <i>La tête en friche</i> .	<i>The Braid</i> [<i>Flätan</i>] by Laetitia Colombani. Original French title: <i>La tresse</i> .
Brief plot description	The barely literate protagonist and narrator, Germain, meets and befriends the elderly and retired academic Margueritte. She inspires and supports him to learn to read, while he reflects on his troubled upbringing and how he relates to his friends and his girlfriend.	Three female protagonists in different parts of the world struggle against different problems. Smita, a Dalit woman in India, wants a better life for her daughter. Giulia, a young woman in Italy, notices that the family business is on the brink of bankruptcy. Sarah, a career-climbing lawyer in Canada, is diagnosed with cancer. A connection between them is shown.
Features of the narrative	First person narration, disjointed chronology, plot is less clear	Third person narration, free indirect style, driven by a clear plot

Given the intermediate level of the course, and the fact that literature is not generally focused on the basic level Swedish Tuition for Immigrants (see Skolverket, 2019), it can be assumed to be a challenge for them to read an authentic novel in the target language.

As evident from Table 2, Anita worked with *Soft in the Head* while Eva worked with *The Braid*. Both are French novels, translated to Swedish. Features of the narratives relevant for the coming analyses are highlighted. Though the plot seems quite clear in *The Braid* (Colombani, 2017), as the three characters must face turns of fortune in dramatic sequences of events, the plot is less obvious in the chronologically disjointed and more sedate *Soft in the Head* (Roger, 2013). However, there is a similarity in how the stories are narrated: when first person, or free indirect style third person, narration is used, the perspective of the writer and the perspective of the characters tend to collapse (e.g. Lodge, 2011, p. 43-44). While this study focuses on classroom work with two novels, the teachers also use other texts, both fictional and non-fictional, when teaching the course.

During the book discussions, the teacher Anita emphasised the feel-good nature of *Soft in the Head*, while her colleague Eva suggested that the stories in *The Braid* could promote discussion. Both teachers also pointed out the novels' value for both language development and a pleasurable reading experience. The analyses in the present study will be oriented towards interaction qualities rather than qualities which can be attributed to the novels themselves.

Results

In this section, I explore the range of literacy practices during the classroom work with the novels and how these practices relate to each other.

Using the novels

The analysis will start by investigating instances of text user practice, where the text is used for learning about language, culture or society.

Learning about language

Learning about language is a prominent focus in the classroom work led by Anita. Aside from devoting weekly time for the discussion of a part of *Soft in the Head*, ample time is also reserved for communication about words and expressions in the book. In one recurring activity, the teacher hands out pieces of paper with different words and expressions which the students, seated in groups, are asked to explain. Previously, the same words and expressions had been handed out in a document serving as 'reading support', which also included questions about the text and its characters. The orientation towards using the text for learning about language is clearest when the meanings of the words and expressions are not discussed in the context of the book. One such example is the word *snor*, which has a range of homonymic meanings. One student maintains that it means 'pinch', while another says *snora*, which means 'having a runny nose', while laughing. Further, the teacher adds that it may mean 'wrapping' or 'twine'. The focus in such an instance is clearly on the meaning of words in a more general sense than on meanings in the text.

However, in many cases during this classroom work, the meanings of words and expressions are indeed connected to the text, as in the short excerpts below.

T: Occur, how can we explain that word?

S: Happen. /.../

T: And this is a Margueritte-word, isn't it? It's a Margueritte-word. It's a formal verb.

[...]

T: And here we have Germain and we have learnt by now that he talks very informally and uses a lot of colloquial language. And 'to kip down' is a colloquial expression for 'to sleep'. He wants to know where she lives and where she sleeps.

The teacher points to the stylistic value of words used by the characters in the book through the connection of informal language to the protagonist, Germain, and formal language to the retired academic/researcher he befriends. The unlikely friendship between these characters is at the core of the story, and later analyses will show that the attention to questions of language also contributes to a practice of meaning-making.

Activities designed primarily to bring attention to the words and expressions in the book are more rarely observed during the classroom work led by Eva and based on *The Braid*. One exception occurs towards the end of the classroom work, where the students, during a group discussion, are required to come up with three words and expressions they have learnt. As the connections to the text are brief or non-existent, these kinds of interactions can be considered as an orientation towards using the novel to learn about language. In most cases, though, attention to language tends to promote making meaning from the text. It also plays a part in text analytical practices, something will be explored in later sections.

Learning about culture

A clear instance of text user practice occurs when the teacher and the students discuss what can be learnt from the books. Anita's students mainly reported learning about words and expressions as the takeaway from *Soft in the Head*, which was also the case for the students reading *The Braid* with Eva. However, students in the latter group also revealed that they learnt about culture:

Siham: And Smita just so I think it's so interesting. /.../ I don't know about it and this culture and everything. It is so interesting for me to read about. I didn't even know about Dalits or those five names that ladder. If you are rich then it is good; if you are poor or if you are Dalit you are worth, yes, less than nothing. I didn't know anything about that. It's just from this book.

The excerpt above is from a group discussion arising from a written question about which character the students liked the most. Instead of evaluating the character, the student, Siham, highlights the information given about India, Dalits and the caste hierarchy ('five names that ladder'). In the open-ended whole class discussions about *The Braid* (see coming sections), there are also several instances of the students asking about things which baffle them in Sweden. Two quite lengthy discussions concern the ban on physical punishment of children in Sweden—relating to a sequence in the book when one of the characters, Smita, lashes out against the daughter—and the Swedish use of nation-wide identity numbers, a topic which evolved unexpectedly from a discussion about religion and discrimination. Thus, the students were given considerable power to 'make use' of the book by steering the discussion to topics of interest outside of the text.

Making meaning of the novels

This part focuses on practices relating to making meaning of the novels. It should be stated at the onset that much of the interactions revolved around reconstructing the plot of the books. This was promoted, for example, by the ‘reading support’ questions handed out by Anita and discussed during the lessons, and by tasks relating to writing summaries and explaining quotes from the book in the classroom work led by Eva. Since the purpose of the study is to explore the range of literacy practices in the classroom works, I have chosen to focus on other meaning-making approaches to the text which often also involved reconstructing a plot.

Understanding language and culture and relating to previous knowledge

The primary focus during Eva’s teaching, at least during the first two weekly sessions of classroom work, is on open-ended whole class discussions. The point of departure for these discussions is a laminated bookmark describing ways to engage with the text, many of which can be seen as metacognitive reading strategies (e.g. Jiménez-Taracido, Martínez, & Chauvie, 2019; Reichenberg, 2014). They involve highlighting new and interesting ideas in the book, things needing clarification, and words which the student wants to have explained. It also involves connecting the book to lived experiences and making predictions. Each student is to bring one such example to the group, which gives them considerable freedom in how to contribute. It is quite common for the students to ask for explanations of words, as in the example below.

Amina: I don’t understand what ‘tons of’ [*tonvis*] means. /.../

T: We read the whole sentence. Everywhere the ground is dirty. Rivers, bodies of water and fields are polluted with tons of faeces. /.../ One thousand kilos equals one ton, right? And ‘tons of’ [*tonvis*] what could we mean by that? When you add *vis*. Several tons, yes. We don’t know exactly how many but many tons we can say. Exactly. Tons of faeces.

Omar: You get sad when you read about Smita.

T: You get very sad when you read about Smita. Ugh, you really do. You can almost smell it when you read, can’t you?

This interaction involves the general meaning of ‘ton’ as well as the significance of the suffix *vis*, in this case meaning ‘many’ or ‘several’ of the root morpheme. Moreover, the excerpt comprises affect-laden reconstructing of the environment of one of the stories and the strife of the protagonist of the same story. Thus, the attention to words and expressions promotes a meaning-making practice. The teacher asking which page the word appears on, and thereby bringing attention to the literary context of the words, is likely a contributing factor.

Some of the words the students ask about have more to do with understanding the different cultures represented in the book than understanding the Swedish language. For example, the students enquire about the meaning of ‘Dalit woman’, ‘Ashkenazi’ and ‘cannoli’. Many students seem to be most interested in Smita’s story of how she seeks to escape her fate as a Dalit. Some of the students use their own knowledge and experiences in their contributions to these whole class talks. For example, one student explains the meaning of the Indian name Nagarajan: ‘snake’ and ‘king’. The below excerpt is part of a longer discussion, where one of the students’, Milad’s, knowledge and experiences are recognised as a resource by the teacher for making sense of the caste-system in India.

S: What does outcaste [*kastlös*] mean?

Milad: I think they really live outside the system. In India there is in their religion even though it is forbidden for today in the law. But still there are outcaste [*kastlösa*] people. /.../ Dalits they don't work for money they work for food. Only gets food.

T: Look, you already know lots about this. Much more than I know.

Milad: But I have lived in Pakistan so.

T: You have lived in Pakistan. Ok, then you know about this. Well, then we got to benefit from your knowledge.

Later, Milad also chooses to contribute with a 'connection' where he elaborates what he perceives as a caste system in Pakistan, which is also a part of a meaning-making practice. Another student, Samer, relates to descriptions of olive-fields as part of Giulia's story in the book, having worked in similar ones himself. Nadja instead relates to Sarah, the career-oriented lawyer in the story, who wonders if her doctor expects her to '[sell] the children on e-Bay' when he asks her to be 'easier on the gas':

Nadja: So funny the expressions she uses but at the same time it was sad and realistic. A lot for those who have children and then I had a question how often we ask ourselves how would my life become if I didn't have children. Perhaps, I could do some (career) or maybe I could have extra hobby or maybe I could-

Samer: Extra money. LAUGHING

The three very different stories in the book, as well as the open-ended nature of the discussions, leave generous room for different experiences, knowledges and kinds of engagements for making meaning of the text and contributing to the discussion.

Negotiating figurative language

The weekly book discussions in Anita's class are organised differently, partly of the students reviewing the 'reading support' and discussing difficult points. As previously noted, this 'reading support' includes words and expressions chosen by the teacher. After these discussions, the teacher regularly asks the students if they need additional help. In the excerpt below, a student is puzzled by a figurative expression.

Maria: One more expression. To act heavy-handedly [*att gå på ullstrumporna*].

T: Tell me which page.

Maria: Page 116

T: Ok. Here, Germain talks about that he, you know, hasn't been all that well brought up. He hasn't ever had any parents who talks with him and discussed and explained why you should do this or that. And then he says, 'So I always act heavy-handedly.'

Naima: He means he won't show consideration for other feelings or I don't care.

T: That he gets a bit clumsy. A bit clumsy. He doesn't really have that finesse. He means well. When Francine is so sad because she has been left, then he tries in a very clumsy way to comfort her.

Germain is the protagonist, and likewise narrator, of the book, and the meanings co-constructed by the teacher and the students serve both to describe and explain the

character. It should be noted that *gå på i ullstrumporna*—literally, ‘keep going in wool stockings’—is neither a common expression nor transparent; rather, it is an idiom which may not be readily understood by many native speakers of Swedish. If seen as a piece of information about language, the expression holds little instrumental value. Instead, the orientation towards knowledge about language promotes a practice of meaning-making.

Figurative language is also touched upon in the discussions about *The Braid*. Sometimes the students themselves ask questions about its use, and in other cases it appears in written questions to be discussed in groups. The following is one such example: ‘The butterfly in the stomach had transformed into a crab. Why is she feeling like that?’ In a whole class follow-up, it is discussed how this wording suggests an important change of fortune in Smita’s story. The teacher also uses the concepts of ‘simile’ and ‘metaphor’ as metalinguistic terms to explain instances of figurative language, as exemplified below during a whole class follow-up discussion about a character’s aversion to water.

Samer: Yes, he describes it as a churchyard. It means that the water has taken something from him. Maybe he lost a family. It surely means that someone died there.

T: So, he makes a simile with the water with a churchyard. We could also call it a metaphor, that he paints the picture that the water is like a churchyard, so we understand that someone has died. Maybe someone who had been close to him we don’t know.

In all these instances, attention to the figurative language contributes to the reconstruction of parts of the plot or important information about the characters. Thus, the orientation is towards meaning-making rather than the analysis of figurative language as a feature of literary style.

Describing, explaining, judging and relating to characters

The discussions about *Soft in the Head* are heavily oriented towards the two central characters and the language they use. The below excerpt is from a group discussion, where a written question positions the students to talk about ‘which character they would like to be’.

Akram: And I agree with you. I believe he has something sickness or something not good in his personality. Correct? Like he talks about something that sometimes when you sound like a child. Like a child.

Masoud: Yes, yes.

Akram: And he is maybe 40 or 45 years old. So sometimes he talks like children /.../

Naima: Yes, and the words he uses that still seem a bit cool for him, I don’t know what, but that way in which he speaks about women too that was really mean. /.../

Maria: But he speaks about details, but I thought it wasn’t bad

Naima: Oh yes it was, it was a bit not in a nice way somehow.

The students seem perplexed by the protagonist and narrator of the book. Akram confirms that he ‘talks like children’ and may suffer from ‘something sickness’, while Naima and Maria do not quite seem to agree on how to judge the character: whether he is ‘mean’ in the way he talks about women or just a bit too ‘detail[ed]’. The comments likely refer to the narrator’s casual description of sexual encounters in the text. The orientation towards describing and judging the character as part of a meaning-making practice is clear.

Later, in whole class discussion, the students also raise difficulties they have with the narrator's way of telling the story:

Maria: I don't know, it is the way he writes as they say. He starts saying something and then he loses the thread, and then he jumps again and again. So, he tells something, then he jumps again.

Several students voice such frustrations with the narrative style, which appears to make the practice of meaning-making more challenging. The teacher, however, encourages the students to pay attention to how the protagonist/narrator, as well as his language and way of telling the story, changes throughout the book:

T: I'm not going to spoil what happens in this book, but I can at least say that Germain will change a lot during this book. Keep this in mind when you talk about how he narrates. Will it change later in the book? Is his language going to change?

Unlike Eva, Anita takes a firm position on the text by outlining features worthy of note. This might serve to scaffold the students' ability to make meaning of a book which is not driven by a clear plot. It is also evident that the questions of language in the book are attributed to the protagonist rather than to the author of the book. In a sense, this limits the possibilities for practices of text analysis.

Also during the work with *The Braid*, the interaction is oriented towards judging the characters. One such occurrence is during a whole class discussion when one of the students asks why Sarah, one of the three central female characters in the book, did not tell anyone, not even her daughter, about her chest pains. Jorje answers as follows:

Jorje: I think Sarah lives in self-denial.

T: Self-denial yes.

Jorje: Self-denial all the time. And on the last row about on page 62, the last sentence says, 'as long as you don't talk about it, it doesn't exist'.

T: Right.

Jorje: It summarises Sarah very well, I think.

These exchanges about the characters are initiated by the students, but the teacher also directs discussions to the characters through written and spoken questions. For example, about halfway through the classroom work, the teacher asks the students how they would describe the characters. One student, Nadja, suggests that Sarah is 'careerist', which the teacher affirms, while other students suggest 'ambitious' and 'industrious'. As in the discussions about *Soft in the Head*, there is not always a consensus on how the characters should be judged. In one instance, the teacher questions one student's opinion that Giulia, the young Italian woman in *The Braid*, should 'cool down' and not 'get carried away by her feelings' towards the mysterious Sikh she meets. Furthermore, there are different opinions regarding Smita's husband's indisposition to her radical plans: Is it a sensible 'realist stance', argued by Veronika in a whole class discussion or did he, as Milad stated in a written reflection, 'hide his courage in the ground'?

The orientation towards explaining and judging characters is also affirmed through both teachers' asking about the characters' development, or their arcs, at the very end of the classroom works. The following excerpt is from a concluding whole class discussion about *Soft in the Head*.

Akram: It was expressive in the end also. He could express himself expressively.

T: Yes, he found it easier to express himself. What do you say about a person who finds it easy to express himself? Can you find a good adjective?

Akram: We only know that word cult, cultured?

T: Cultured. Yes, that is when you have sort of slightly more intellectual interests. But it might be so, I put a small question mark here, that Germain is an eloquent person. An eloquent person. Who finds it easier to express himself through speech. And about Germain, he has at least become more eloquent by the end of the book than he was when we met him, hasn't he? Because in the beginning of the book, he found it really difficult to put his thoughts and feelings into words. And this has become easier for him by the end.

As previously indicated, Anita more frequently directs the discussions by taking stances on the text. In the above excerpt, she reformulates the student's attempt to judge the character, and elaborates the character development she perceives. However, Eva also concludes with discussions on how the characters develop throughout the story, building on summaries of the characters the students had written earlier during the classroom work. They also build on a final set of written questions where the students are asked, among other things, to compare the three women's 'fighting spirit' in addition to comparing some of the male characters. One of students, Pablo, argues that all of the women are fighting against patriarchal structures:

Pablo: I think there is a similarity that all of them fight against a patriarchal society. Like Smita fights against the patriarchal society in India where women can't (x x). And Giulia fights the kind of society because she goes against the family when she starts that affair with the man from another culture. And last there is Sarah she fights against this kind of patriarchal system in work.

The literacy practices, which are actively shaped by the teachers, are strongly oriented towards understanding and evaluating the characters. Even if the teachers refrain from introducing concepts for the discussion of meanings in the book on a more abstract level, it is clear that the interactions revolve around what could be described as central themes in the book, such as learning throughout life, unexpected friendships and conflicts between individuals and society.

Analysing the novels

While much of the interaction is oriented towards meaning-making, in the broad understanding of the word taken in the present study, there are also instances when the teachers, or the students, take a more objectifying and critical stance on the novels.

Explaining narrative structure

From the previous section, it is clear that some of the students struggle with the way *Soft in the Head* is narrated. During one of the early book discussions, the teacher brings attention to how it employs disjointed chronology:

T: I think many of the novels you've been working with have had a chronological plot. Do you understand? This direction. /.../ Chronos in Greek mythology, that's the god of time. So chronological it's about time. To start with what happens first. And then we move forwards. Some of you, you remember that we worked with *The Emperor of Portugallia*. How did it start?

S: When she was born.

T: Klara-Fina was born. Then she was a child and then she was young and then she was a young adult, she left her parents she went to town etc. So, we started back in time and went forwards. /.../ And you start with reading novels like that. They have a pretty simple composition. But now we get to where they disrupt the chronology, where they jump a bit back and forth. Maybe we get some flashbacks. We start a little bit now in this part of the course. Then more will come in the next part and it's about practicing reading more challenging texts.

The teacher draws an arrow facing right on the whiteboard, representing 'chronological plot', and she erases sections of this arrow as she explains the notion of 'disrupted chronology' in texts. Thus, she introduces a metalanguage for analysing plot structure, while also drawing upon prior classroom work with literature to clarify the concepts. As some of the students initially seem frustrated by the narrator jumping from one thing to another, the teacher's explanation, and orientation towards text analysis, may aid the students in approaching the text's puzzling, disrupted chronology.

Narrative structure is also addressed in the interaction during the work with *The Braid*. One of the students, Samer, expresses that he noted lots of 'predictions' because he wanted to skip sections to know what happen next in Smita's story:

Samer: And I used lots of P [predictions] after every section I wanted to know more /.../ When for example /.../ [the] writer talks [about Smita] just one section and then Giulia starts. But this I want to know what will happen. I was thinking to go directly to Smita. LAUGHING /.../

T: Terrific to hear that you are curious and want to know what happens. Because that's also what the writers want: for us to get curious. It becomes like cliffhangers; you call it that in English. /.../ Do we have a good word for that in Swedish? I don't think we do; we use that word in Swedish. That is, the author intentionally stops telling when it is most exciting. So that you sort of, just like in our series they finish the same way, don't they, so we want to go on to the next episode and see what happens.

The teacher is delighted by Samer's interest in the story. She takes the opportunity to introduce the metalinguistic term of 'cliffhanger' to describe the narrative, with a reference to how television dramas are typically structured. There are several instances when *The Braid* is compared to films; for example, during a group discussion one of the written questions is if there is any particular 'scene' which the students remember. Also, during a concluding whole class discussion, one student makes the argument that it would work well as a movie. The teacher then also draws attention to the fact that the author is a screenwriter, a piece of information found on in the paratext on the back cover. Such interactions serve to objectify the text, indicating a practice of text analysis.

Criticising representations

During an early whole class discussion, one of the students points to the French writer's nationality, and how she chooses to represent the different cultures in the novel:

Naser: I didn't read everything, but I have one thing here. Because Laetitia she is French woman.

T: You mean the author Laetitia.

Naser: Yes, I think [that] her perspective on India poor and women they don't have rights and many things. This comes [as the] first thing in the story all the time. But there is another side /.../ We talk about the people there. Think that they are poor, they don't have life, they just, yes, all the time. There are also feelings, there are also more sides. /.../ But there is no happiness [in the story].

While the student struggles to formulate abstract thoughts, it is apparent that he perceives a one-sided representation of India in the book. On a similar note, although in a much earlier discussion, one student argued that Italy is represented in a 'clichéd' way in Giulia's story. These are examples of students using previous experiences and knowledge to resist representations by the author, thus reading 'against the grain' (Janks, 2010). Another of the students, however, defends the author's choices by pointing out how the three different stories and characters contribute to the overall plot:

Nadja: She has this woman with this story to compare them with the others. So also not everyone in Canada is like Sarah. Not everyone in Italy is like Giulia. But she chose that one, that one, that one just to compare them because there's a big difference so we can see that difference.

The teacher also defends the book with reference to narrative structure: that stories must build on struggle and 'conflicts which needs to be solved'. But she also encourages criticising the text, including how the author may represent different people and cultures in ways which are 'a bit stereotyped and clichéd'. However, she rarely actively positions the students to take such a stance. Thus, this orientation towards text analysis is mainly initiated by the students.

Expressing opinions about the book

Towards the end of the classroom work, the students are expected to express their thoughts about the novel through written and spoken questions. Below, a group of students are discussing what they thought about the end of *The Braid*.

Lin: I thought the ending of the book was fun. (Finally) all the women could solve their problems themselves. /.../ They have [been] brave. They fought hard as they could. Maybe they want to think that I can solve all problems. I think that is good and gives me many-

Jorje: Strength.

Lin: Yes, strength.

Lin appears to find the ending, where the female protagonists have solved their respective problems, satisfying and empowering. Jorje, however, later more critically asserts that the ending felt 'a bit simple' and 'like a story for small children'.

Anita, in a whole class discussion, also asks the students about their reading experience after finishing the book. The discussions mostly revolved around how the

protagonist, and his language, changed throughout the book (see previous analyses and below) but one of the students makes a remark about the writer:

Mira: Well, even if the writer made us boring in the beginning but he showed how you can change or how can change one's life.

The wording 'made us boring' (likely intending to express 'bored us') echoes the initial frustration some students felt about reading an idiosyncratically told narrative. The student also seems to perceive a message in the book, which is repeated during a subsequent group discussion when they are required to express 'what [they] think the writer want to say with the novel':

Akram: You can educate yourself. It doesn't matter which year. /.../

Naima: That someone can change your life and you can change you can always be better, and it [is] never too late.

Abdul: We can also say that one person can do a lot. A person can do a lot change life for other person.

The perceived message here, evoking the protagonist's change under the benevolent guidance of Margueritte, is well aligned to the position taken by the teacher during the classroom work. Overall, it is evident that the varied stances on *The Braid* are not seen in the discussions about *Soft in the Head*. While it could be related differences between the teachers and/or the student groups, it seems likely that the books themselves play an important part: the range of stories, environments and character arcs to either criticise or empathise with is quite different.

Describing the language of the novels

As previously indicated, much attention is paid to the language of the novels. After having completed *Soft in the Head*, the students were faced with the task of discussing the language used in the book as part of during a concluding written examination on the book. This is followed up during a subsequent lesson.

Omar: Well I think that [in] this novel the language was varied.

T: Varied language. Yes, what's your idea about that?

Omar: Sometimes Germain talks like slang language and there lots of bad words like fuck and the like. (You don't want to write that here.)

LAUGHTER And sometimes like formal language like when Margueritte is talking. Yes, well I answered that it was a varied language.

T: Oh, but it certainly is. And you also bring attention to something important, that different characters express themselves differently. The language mirrors their personality in a way. And then, when you say that Germain expresses himself in the beginning of the book. Does anything happen with his way of expressing himself?

Omar: It improves after he starts to read when Margueritte (teaches him).

The views Omar expresses about the language in the novel is well in line with the stance the teacher has modelled previously during the classroom work: linguistic style is connected to understanding and explaining the characters. The classroom work with *The Braid* concludes with a similar discussion:

Zara: I think it is Sarah it is difficult to understand. Here I think the writer just thinks that Sarah is a lawyer and it is on a high level. She has studied a lot. /.../ For me Smita /.../ is not difficult since I know the culture from India, and I know religion and everything. So that's why it's easier.

John: Here among us Smita is more difficult.

T: You found it more difficult.

John: Yes, there are many words which are religion.

T: The words related to religion; you found those difficult. Yes, right. /.../

The knowledge you already bring with you when you read something is really important, isn't it? The prior knowledge you have.

Zara attributes the questions of language to character, just as Anita and her students did, but she also points out how the language relates to the different cultures and social environments in the three stories. And the students indeed seem to have different opinions about the language depending on prior knowledge and experience, which the teacher reflects upon in her concluding remark. This attention to language serves as a means to objectifying and analysing the text. However, just as in Anita's class, it is evident that the students, as well as the teacher, do not talk about language primarily in terms of literary style, but in terms of how the language facilitates or frustrates comprehension of the text. In a way, the analytical practices perceived here are largely put into the service of meaning-making.

Breaking the code

Since the study was conducted among intermediate second language learners, I did not expect instances where code breaking is explicitly discussed. However, during a whole class discussion about *The Braid*, one student enquires about the meaning of 'Deshnoke' and 'Karminata'. The teacher points out how the capital letters indicate that these words are names, and thus refers to conventions of orthography.

During another of the group discussions, Eva requires the students to examine paragraphing and reported speech in the book—conventions of writing which had previously been a focus of instruction. The students make the following remarks on how indentation and blank-line paragraphing is sometimes mixed:

Siham: Everything is mixed but if you read about Smita it is not mixed as much I think.

Jorje: Yes, you are right. /.../ I believe it is a graphical [method] to also tell about the different characters. It is also a kind of communication you could say. Maybe Sarah also lives more complicated so the text could appear [so] as well.

Interestingly, Jorje argues that conventions for the visual organisation of text are used to express differences between the characters. Thus, what could have seemed like a simple instance of text use for rehearsing knowledge about paragraphing interacts with both meaning-making and text analytical practices. It affirms the strong orientation towards describing and explaining characters in the book which has been previously discussed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The exploration of literacy practices during the classroom work has shown that attention to words and expressions, linguistic style, analysis of narrative structure, as well as some code breaking practices, were employed in the of meaning-making. It indicates that the overriding priority in working with literature was to understand, and scaffold understanding, of the novels. This seems aligned with the syllabus, which requires the teacher to assess the students' comprehension.

Some differences were noted in the studied classroom works. The interaction during Eva's work with *The Braid* showed the value of opening up the discussions for the students' diverse experiences. During the meaning-making and text analytical practices, there were examples of reading both with and against the grain of the text (cf. Janks, 2010). This seemed to enrich the range of literacy practices to not only involve relating emphatically to experiences and characters in the novel but also taking more critical stances on the text. In addition, it enabled students to make contributions of knowledge. Anita's leading the discussion in a more authoritative fashion, based on her own 'didactic reading' of *Soft in the Head*, could be attributed to teaching style. On the other hand, the difference observed could also depend on the book itself. Lacking the clear plot and diverse characters present in *The Braid*, Anita's firmer position on *Soft in the Head* served to stimulate discussions and scaffold the students' process of meaning-making. A more critical stance to the novel could have involved bringing attention to how middle-class values of language, reading and 'being cultured' were reproduced in the book.

Overall, the kinds of text use promoted during the studied classroom works were the use of novels in learning about language and engaging in practices of discussing the characters. In addition to discussing the language of the novel in relation to its characters, I believe it would have been possible to discuss features such as language, voice, and narrative perspective as matters of literary and narrative style (cf. Carroli, 2011. p. 24-25). This could have led to a deeper appreciation of how meaning-making relates to the author's conscious choices.

Theoretical models which highlight different stances to texts rarely explore how different literacy practices relate to each other when employed in teaching (cf. Langer, 1995/2017; Lee, 2013; Leland et al., 2012). These models also tend to downplay the work teachers and second language learners may need to do with the language of the novels. My operationalisation of Freebody and Luke's framework (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999) in the present study can serve as a model for bringing more attention to these aspects. An interesting question for further research is how students' participation in literacy practices relates to their backgrounds and previous frames of reference for studying and using literature in educational institutions (e.g. Mezirow, 1991). This could not be explored in the present study, as such data was not collected.

A major implication for teaching is that a necessary focus on language and meaning-making in no way rules out attention to text analysis; rather, meaning-making may benefit from and build upon text analysis. Similarly, shared ambitions between teachers the students to 'use' the novels for language development can promote engagement with characters and plot rather than reduce the reading to purposes outside the text. The study also shows the value of making room for diverse learners' experiences to critically interrogate representations in books. To further promote adult second learners' opportunities to engage in critical literacy practices—and ensure that such participation is not restricted to students who already have developed this capability through prior experiences—the application of critical literacy could be more actively modelled and encouraged by the teachers and the materials used in instruction. To stimulate such

teaching practices, it would appear necessary to remedy the absence of critical literacy perspectives in the syllabus—along with the lack of dedicated teacher training for meeting the needs and experiences of adult second language learners.

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