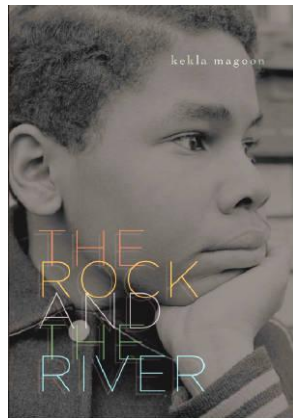


# How to use *The Rock and the River* in the English classroom

The benefits of literature in the language classroom



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## **Abstract**

**Title:** How to use The Rock and the River in the English classroom

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The aim of this study is to illustrate the advantages of literature in the teaching of English as a second language for Upper Secondary School. More specifically, the study will focus at how the African-American Civil Rights Movement can be presented to students in the English classroom by looking at the novel "The Rock and the River" written by Kekla Magoon and discuss various approaches a teacher could have when teaching with the book as a basis. By doing so, the benefits of working with authentic literature in the language classroom will be highlighted and ways to work with these types of texts will be suggested by referring to the Swedish syllabus and relevant pedagogical literature. Examples of exercises and discussion topics that can be performed when using this novel/ topic in a literature project in class will be presented, all of which will be based on the Swedish curriculum for Upper Secondary School. Furthermore, it will be included in the discussion how fundamental elements of language learning can be integrated into the activities that will be presented as part of the project. This study shows how working with literature can cover both linguistic elements in the teaching of literature as well as cultural and ethical aspects that enrich students' learning experience and personal growth.

**Keywords:** Literature, Civil Rights Movement, Second language acquisition, The Rock and the River

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## **Introduction**

*“When I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature. If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.” – Maya Angelou*

This quote will hopefully permeate this essay and let the reader understand the purpose of it: that reading is not only a means of gaining culture and enriching our intellect, but it also increases our understanding of the world around us as well as enabling us to put our own lives into perspective.

In this essay I have chosen to work with the novel *The Rock and the River* by Kekla Magoon in the English classroom in Upper Secondary School. This will be done in order to provide students with the many advantages of working with literature. Through this novel students learn about the Civil Rights movement and the daily discrimination of oppressed African-Americans which is told through an African-American teenage boy called Sam. Sam, the protagonist of this novel, has to decide whether to join his father in a non-violent struggle for the rights of the African-Americans or to join his brother who is part of a militant group, the Black Panthers.

Working with *The Rock and the River* will not only expose students to the use of the target language but also give them access to the culture and history of the people whose language they are studying. Apart from the linguistic benefits literature provides for the learner, it is also important to note the wider educational function of literature which contributes to the development of students' critical abilities and also increases their emotional awareness.

The novel I chose gives an excellent example of the versatile use of literature in the language classroom since it provides the students with the above mentioned benefits of language, knowledge of history and most importantly raises moral awareness.

In this essay I will discuss how literature contributes to second language acquisition and demonstrate various ways of working with literature based on *The Rock and River*. Furthermore, I will discuss the novel through statements found in the Swedish curriculum for Upper Secondary School (Lgy11) and base this essay on the education act (2010:800) which states that “education in schools is aimed at allowing students to acquire and develop *knowledge* and *values*” (My translation, SFS 2010:800). In addition, it states that education “should promote the student’s development and learning, and a lifelong desire to learn. The training shall convey and establish respect for human rights and fundamental democratic values that the Swedish society is based on” (My translation, SFS 2010:800). Working with literature can be performed in such a way as to accomplish these aims, promote students’ receptive and productive skills and fulfill other requirements of the curriculum such as providing students with opportunities to develop “the ability to discuss and reflect upon life and social and cultural phenomena in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (My translation, skolverket.se).

In the first chapter I will discuss why we should integrate literature with language teaching by emphasizing a few of its advantages that are relevant for *The Rock and the River*. I will continue the discussion with ways to use literature and factors that need to be considered when choosing literature in the language classroom. This chapter will be the foundation for further discussion in the next section where previously mentioned factors will be linked to the novel. Here the focus will be laid on pedagogical and didactic reasons for teaching *The Rock and the River*. Subsequently, I will put the discussion into practice and suggest classroom activities when working with the novel, which will mainly be inspired by the themes in the

book. These classroom activities will be a suggestion of how to work with authentic texts and will hopefully serve as a source of inspiration to other teachers who want to work with literature in the language classroom.

*The Rock and the River* is not written in an advanced language and thus suitable for English A-C. However, since this novel requires reflective skills and a more fluent language and also considering the amount of independent work in this project, I find this novel more suitable for students in Upper Secondary School, English B-C course. These students are also at a suitable age to discuss the themes presented in the book which is of importance since I want to give my students the opportunity to discuss the novel in class and reflect over different conceptions of life by discussing these from different perspectives. Through literary discussions in the classroom, where the students and I use *The Rock and the River* as a foundation, I can start a process within the students and raise linguistic and historical awareness while making them reflect on human rights and the importance of upholding these.

## Chapter 1

### **The benefits of literature in the language classroom**

Oftentimes the function of literature in the language classroom is reduced to its ability to promote students' reading skills, yet it can also fulfill a number of other purposes in a school curriculum if used properly by the teacher. In this section I will discuss the different benefits of literature in the language classroom which can be very advantageous for the students and assist them in numerous areas, educational as well as personal.

Language enrichment is one benefit of extensive reading which is especially meaningful in the language classroom since it helps students develop their language proficiency by introducing them to written English and at the same time inspiring them to read more. Raj and Hunt state that literature helps students to develop their language proficiency through materials that enrich learning (Hedge 201). This is also shown in a study of Hafiz and Tudor (1989) who set up an extra-curricular extensive reading program under three months, using graded readers with an experimental group of second language learners in a school and compared their results with two other groups in the same city. Although the researchers were aware of the difficulty of excluding other factors that can have an influence on the development of the language acquisition, the results showed a significant improvement of the second language group in particular in their writing skills (Hedge 201). Robb and Susser (1989) made a similar experiment with Japanese college students, comparing their improvement of reading comprehension taught by either a skills-based or an extensive reading procedure. Their results showed that the extensive reading procedure was no less effective than the skills-based and they concluded that

[i]f the extensive reading procedure is as effective as the skills procedures in terms of test scores, the implications for the teaching of FL/EFL reading are profound. By

reading what they choose and (more or less) enjoying their homework, students' motivation to learn will increase, which will in turn benefit their eventual acquisition of the target language. (quoted in Hedge 201)

Extensive reading certainly has the benefit of increasing students' exposure to English and can be particularly important for independent learning outside the classroom. The benefits of literature can also be appreciated immediately in relation to vocabulary learning due to the fact that literature extends the learners' receptive vocabulary and turns it into a more active form of knowledge (Collie and Slater 4). Wilkins confirms this and makes the point that learners can effectively come to understand, through reading, which words are appropriate in which contexts: "Through reading the learner is exposed to the lexical items embedded in natural linguistic contexts, and as a result they begin slowly to have the same meaningfulness...that they have for the native speaker" (quoted in Hedge 204). The reader will inter alia encounter new vocabulary which he/she will have to look up in order to be able to follow the text. This will help the learners to expand their vocabulary thus creating fluency which in its turn contributes to the development of language proficiency.

By being able to read a contextual body of text learners become also more familiar with the various functions and formations of sentences and structures. Collie and Slater highlight this in their book and write that "[t]he extensive reading required in tackling a novel or long play develops the student's ability to make inferences from linguistic clues, and to deduce meaning from context, both useful tools in reading other sorts of material as well" (Collie and Slater 5). Therefore one can say that engaging second language learners in language acquisition through aural and written comprehensible input such as extensive reading, helps them acquire the underlying grammar rather "unconsciously". Although this presupposes that the learners master the basics of grammar and can apply these to the extent where they can make sense of a text.



Learning grammar through extensive instruction not only takes up massive amounts of students' time but also mental energy which can result in loss of motivation. Also, many students will experience difficulties applying the learned rules in the actual performance whereas the assimilation of grammar through reading will enable learners to apply it intuitively in their actual language use without paying too much attention to forms of the language.

Another advantage of teaching literature is that it promotes independent learning since it puts the students in the center of their development of language skills. This can also be more motivating and productive than a teacher-centered classroom with the condition that students enjoy what they are reading. Their motivation to learn will increase, which will in turn benefit students' eventual acquisition of the target language. Subsequently one can say that involving students into extensive reading can be a highly productive step towards independent learning since students have a chance to choose when and where they want to read. Engaging them in these sorts of activities will yield substantial possibilities for them to go on learning by themselves. The teacher's responsibilities in helping learners achieve these goals will be to motivate and inspire students to read by selecting or creating appropriate texts or design useful tasks to intensify the reading experience. Language learners need to be exposed to large amounts of comprehensible input that is relevant and interesting to them. Classroom activities which are designed to enhance the reading experience are therefore of importance since they encourage extensive reading and create a supportive environment for language practice.

Literature also contributes to cultural enrichment which Botelho and Rudman describe through the use of the metaphors of mirrors, windows and doors. They write that literature provides the reader with ways that enable them to put their own cultures into perspective as well giving them a chance to enter the culture of others. The mirror symbolizes literature's ability to reflect one's life and the window indicates that through literature we can view

someone else's world. Finally the door symbolizes the access literature provides both into and out of one's everyday condition. In their own words, "[t]he mirror invites self-contemplation and affirmation of identity. The window permits a view of other people's lives. The door invites interaction" (xiii).

Books are one way to learn about the world. Not all second language learners have the possibility to live or even visit the country where the language they are learning is spoken. To help learners gain an understanding of the way of life of the country, Collie and Slater recommend more indirect routes through newspapers, radio programs, films or videos, and last but not least, literary works (Collie and Slater 4). Collie and Slater write that "a literary work can transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader in another country or a different period of history" (Collie and Slater 3). Different genres of literature and diversity in reading material familiarize different uses of language to learners and help them recognize accents, dialects, cultural as well as social differences in language use and enable them to distinguish between formal and regular speech.

Although one can argue that the world of literature is a created one, it is more authentic, diverse and closer to the 'real-life use of the language' than the text and dialogues in text books. Furthermore authentic texts have the advantage of bringing certain historical and cultural events back to life for the reader and thus mediate valuable knowledge about the culture of a country to them. Another important factor is the fact that students with the help of these works can put their own lives into perspective and get personally involved in the sense that they find parallels to their own lives. This pre-supposes the readers/learners' interest in the literary work and once raised, it can be used to their advantage in various classroom activities where information and new knowledge can be processed through for instance discussions, whereby the target language is used and trained in ways that also contribute to

cultural enrichment. In other words literature can shape our perception of the world and influence how we relate to other people.

### **What to choose and how to teach**

In order to get the most out of a literature class we need to know what sort of literature is the most suitable for language learners. This is clearly dependent on the needs and interest of the group of students. However, one primary factor to consider as suggested by Collie and Slater is whether a particular work is able to stimulate the kind of personal involvement previously described, by arousing the learners' interest and provoking positive reactions from them: "If it's meaningful and enjoyable, reading is more likely to have a lasting and beneficial effect upon the learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge" (Collie and Slater 6).

Another important factor that needs to be considered is the level of language difficulty. If the text contains too much vocabulary that the learner cannot identify, it will obstruct the reading experience of the learner and result in loss of interest in continuing reading. It is important to be aware of the linguistic and cultural gap foreign students have to bridge, therefore a literary work needs to be chosen that is not too much above the students' normal reading proficiency. According to Hedge students are capable of guessing 60-80 percent of unknown words if the density of new words is not too high (193).

Once a novel is chosen, there are many ways to work with it that can give the reading experience more breadth and depth. Hedge suggests a three-phase procedure involving pre-, while- and post-reading stages in order to ensure that reading is taught in the sense of helping learners develop an increasing ability to tackle texts. During the pre-reading phase learners can be encouraged to do a number of things such as become oriented to the context of the text, for example for what purpose it was originally produced or tune into the content of the text and with the help of the teacher establish a reason for reading and express an attitude about

the topic. In pre-reading discussions students get a chance to review their own experiences in relation to the topic and activate existing cultural knowledge. Furthermore pre-reading activities created by the teacher can also help students to become familiar with some language of the text to ensure purposeful reading (Hedge 210).

While-reading activities generally aim to keep the learners' attention while they read. Students can be given activities which require them to follow the order of ideas in a text or react to the opinions expressed in the text, understand the information it contains and ask themselves questions and make notes they can use in later discussion to confirm expectations or predict the next part of the text with various clues. Hedge notes that, as yet, there are few studies to show the effects of while-reading activities, and describes their outcomes as contradictory. However, according to her, many students report positively on the usefulness of while-reading activities and many teachers therefore try to encourage activity, reflection, and response while reading (Hedge 210).

Post-reading activities can be carried out in various ways depending on the text, but should ideally tie up with the reading purpose, so that students check and discuss activities done while reading and make use of what they have read in a meaningful way, for instance by discussing their response to the writer's opinion or by using notes for another writing activity. Subsequently, a wide range of activities can be put into practice focusing either on the content of the text or on language exercises (Hedge 210).

Similarly to Hedge, Langer suggests, in her book *Envisioning Literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction*, a reading strategy that is supposed to enhance the reading experience and provide the reader with what she calls 'envisionment-building'. According to her, envisionment building is an activity "where meanings change and shift and grow as a mind creates its understanding of a work" (14). Envisionment building consists of four phases which Langer calls 'stances':

### **1. Being out and stepping into an environment**

This stance occurs in the beginning of the reading where the reader tries to form an opinion about the characters, the story and the setting in the text. The reader can, however, return to this point at any time in their reading, especially when he/she encounters an unexpected event or linguistic barriers that make him/her lose focus on the text.

### **2. Being in and moving through an environment**

Here Langer says that “we take new information and immediately use it to go beyond what we already understand” (17). According to her, in this stance understanding is developed through questions about the content of the novel which the readers relate to themselves and their lives.

### **3. Stepping out and rethinking what one knows**

The third stance according to Langer “is the time when the thoughts in our environments give us cause to shift the focus of meaning development for a moment, from the text-world we are creating to what those ideas mean for our own lives” (17-18).

### **4. Stepping out and objectifying the experience**

In this stance the reader distances him-/herself from the environment he/she has developed and becomes more objective, meaning that the reader in this stance evaluates the reading experience as a whole and analyses the quality of the book more critically.

These two strategies suggested by Hedge and Langer can be combined to weave together the moral function of literature with the formal properties of the work itself. Rosenblatt points out in her book *Literature as Exploration* that “human understanding and literary sophistication

sustain and nourish one another” (53). Therefore it is of importance to supplement the technical and formal aspects of a literary work by “those elements in the work that meet the reader’s need for psychological satisfactions and social insights” (52). Hence one can say that Hedge’s and Langer’s reading strategies are suitable and can be favorably combined to cover the formal elements of *The Rock and the River* as well as “involve the [...] emotional responsiveness [and] the human sympathies, of the reader” (Rosenblatt 52).

## Chapter 2

### **Pedagogical and didactic reasons for working with *The Rock and the River***

The main aim of working with this novel is primarily to improve language proficiency and to cultivate a lifetime reading habit that will increase students' linguistic and cultural knowledge and moreover support their social development. However, beside the previously discussed benefits of language acquisition through extensive reading, this book I have chosen also introduces a very important historical period to the language learner. *The Rock and the River* by Kekla Magoon brings the Civil Rights movement back to life and shines a light on divisions within the African-American community during that period of time. It mediates important values to teenagers as well as provides them with historical and cultural awareness. Although *The Rock and the River* deals with a historical event, it provides the reader with other topics that are still up-to-date in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as racial conflicts, injustice, family values and a teenage boy's struggle for identity. Moreover, it stimulates young readers to develop moral reasoning skills when discussing these issues, which are also highlighted in the Swedish curriculum which states that "[t]he school's goal is that every student can make informed choices based on knowledge of human rights and fundamental democratic values and personal experiences" (My translation, skolverket.se).

The background to the book and its relevance to cultural studies will be dealt with before the students start reading the novel, in order to provide them with enough knowledge to process the text. However, I believe that the novel supplements the cultural studies and gives them more depth since it gives historical facts a human voice which can contribute to a better understanding of the living conditions and social issues of the African-American community at that time. This corresponds to the goal in the curriculum that claims that the content of communication in the English class should cover "living conditions, attitudes, values,

traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (My translation, skolverket.se). The curriculum also mentions that “teachers should openly present and analyze, together with the students different values, perceptions, problems and consequences” (My translation, skolverket.se). These goals can be achieved through the use of *The Rock and the River* since the novel contains a wealth of material for classroom discussions and activities that deal with these topics.

One of the main issues that is developed throughout the book are the racial conflicts that are described vividly and reflect the discrimination and unjust treatment African-Americans had to endure during the 1960s. It is important to provide students with a holistic perspective on these issues in order for them to develop a critical understanding of concepts such as oppression, discrimination and racism. These conflicts can start processes within the students to help them reflect about their definitions and understanding of discrimination and help them envision the political climate of the USA in the 1960s. The most significant example of the inhumane treatment of African-Americans in the book is the unprovoked beating and arrest of Sam’s friend Bucky by two policemen (65). This incident has a key role in the novel since it enables the students to emotionally relate to and empathize with the protagonist who witnesses how his friend is unjustly beaten to the ground by policemen. Since the protagonist is also the narrator of the story, the students will be able to see the harassments and discrimination through the eyes of an African-American boy which will make it easier for the students to empathize with the helpless situation of the African-Americans at that time.

Empathy is very beneficial in the reading process and also something that is suggested in the curriculum which explicitly requires the school to work with and “promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathize” (My translation, skolverket.se). As psychologist Ulla Holm points out in her book *Empati: Att förstå andra människors känslor*, empathy can



best be described as feeling *with* the person; to be able to put yourself in that person's place (106). Since the narrator is also a teenager whose thoughts are described in a way most teenagers can relate to, students will more easily be able to put themselves in his place and understand how his life and personality is affected by what happens around him.

Zillmann argues in *Mechanisms of Emotional Involvement with Drama* that affective disposition towards characters in the story and empathy are related: the stronger the affective disposition, the stronger the reader's empathy and emotional involvement (33). In the incident with Bucky for instance, the readers witness an emotional shift in the protagonist and will be able to identify with it since the level of empathy rises the more we are engaged in the story. This incident in the book can also be an opening for students to discuss fundamental democratic values mentioned in the education act that underlines the importance of upholding human rights, individual freedom and solidarity among people (My translation, skolverket.se). Students can discuss the role of the police in their country and compare it to how the police is portrayed in the book and also how today's society would react to such violations of human rights especially by authority figures. The role of the police in the novel is of importance since it portrays the active oppression and the indifference of the law toward African-Americans - explaining why they tended to avoid every contact with them even in situations when the law should have been on their side because they knew that "when the cops came, it wouldn't matter who had started it. It would be always [them] against the bricks" (Magoon 6). An essential part of the discussions will be to view these issues from different perspectives and give the students insight into for instance institutional aspects of racism. Students must understand how various forms of racism have developed historically and where their roots lie.

The living conditions and the segregation of the African-American people are also very well portrayed in the book. Although Sam and his family did not seem to suffer economically,

one can understand that they were more fortunate than most other African-Americans during that time. While Sam and his family live uptown and both of his parents have jobs, most of Sam and Stick's friends live downtown and have to work in order to provide a living for themselves and their families. Most of them live under poor conditions as for instance Bucky who lives on the streets with his family. This will show students how economic and social factors influenced the civil rights movement and more importantly how these resulted in the divergent attitudes toward the movement and divisions among the African-American community during the 1960s. These divisions and differences of opinion characterize the novel and keep occurring throughout text, putting Sam in a position of moral conflicts.

When students reach what Langer describes as the second stance, they will have enough information about the story and the different characters to be able to form an envisionment based on subjective understanding. This will support them in developing their reasoning skills when confronted with the main moral conflict in the book which deals with an issue most adolescents will be able to relate to: the difficulty of having to live up to other people's expectations such as family and friends. Sam embodies these conflicting views since he himself is torn between his parents and his friends. Sam's father, who is the moral voice in the novel, tries to mediate the importance of non-violence to his sons always telling them: "People are more afraid of ideas than of guns" (146). While Sam's father works closely with Martin L. King and organizes non-violent demonstrations in pursuit of civil rights, many of the people downtown support the Black Panthers, who have the same goals as Martin L. King and Sam's father, but different methods, such as the use of weapons which goes against everything Sam's father believes in. The people living downtown are more exposed to harassments and find the Panthers' methods more effective. In an argument between Sam and his girlfriend the different attitudes of the African-American people of that time becomes apparent

- Father says the cops are out to get folks who act militant.
- They are out to get all of us, Sam!
- But when things are peaceful, it's obvious to everyone that the arrests are for no good reason.
- They don't need a reason. Maybe they do up where you live, but they sure don't down here. (150)

These two perspectives are an interesting foundation for discussion in the classroom because as mentioned in the curriculum it is important to “provide students with a basis as well as support their ability to develop personal standpoints” (skolverket.se). Through these discussions students learn to understand the different characters' standpoints and will be given an opportunity to reflect upon these from different perspectives in order to be able to put their ethical considerations into practice.

The novel gives the students a hint on how the atmosphere of that time period must have felt like for many people: that a lot of effort was made by the non-violent activists in order to stop injustice, yet it didn't bring any quick results. At one of Sam's father's demonstrations Sam catches himself thinking of a way to escape without his father noticing. He thinks to himself: “So here we all were. Here we'd all been for as long as I could remember. I was tired of marching, of protesting. Of leaning my back against a wall and expecting the wall to move. I wanted to rest” (3). Although Sam and Stick respect their father's work, the incident with their friend Bucky makes them realize that the African-American community needs immediate help which their father's demonstrations have not yet been able to provide them with.

When Stick finally leaves home and joins the Black Panthers against his father's will, Sam once again feels torn. To avoid disappointing his father he keeps showing up at his demonstrations and helps him prepare for them, yet his curiosity for the Panthers grows as all

his friends and now even his brother have joined them. When he starts to secretly participate in the meetings of the Black Panthers his brother tells him that he can't be on both sides and has to choose whom he wants to support since he "can't be the rock and the river" (83). These conflicts are important to discuss with the students as they are also probably a part of their own identity seeking. The students can discuss the pros and cons of both ideologies and which they consider more effective. Furthermore students can discuss how the family values and the pressure from friends influence Sam in his decision making. One can say that the book discussions will mainly revolve around these issues: Sam's role as a son, as a brother, as a friend, and last but not least, as a teenager. However these discussions also work with the aims of the curriculum which are suggested for communication in the English classroom. In the end of the book Sam's character matures and he finds himself in all the chaos that has been revolving around him. He realizes that he does not have to follow anyone to find the right paths in life but he has to find it himself: "I knew there were no promises ahead, no road map. I couldn't follow anymore. I was the river. I was the one who would turn the corner and see what tomorrow held in store" (283).

The end of the story is very interesting since it does not mediate a clear non-violent message to the students as one would expect but it motivates them instead to find their own ways in life and to be conscious about the consequences of their actions. The curriculum also highlights the importance of helping students to develop a safe identity and encourage them to think for themselves and "strengthen their confidence and be able to take the initiative, take responsibility and influence their conditions" (My translation, skolverket.se).

I believe that the novel provides the students with important reasoning skills and values that are suggested by the Swedish curriculum. Another important factor is that the book is easy to read and the students will be able to relate to the protagonist on several different levels, such as the pressure of living up to the expectations of others and the struggle of

finding themselves. Bo Lundahl states in his book *Läsa på främmande språk* that there are certain factors teachers should focus on when looking for suitable literature for the language classroom. According to him the teachers should provide the students with books they can relate to and that are meaningful in terms of challenging the reader without being too hard to understand (77). Books that are easy to comprehend will keep the students' attention on the content of the text, and the main criteria for this according to Lundahl is to choose a simple story that proceeds chronologically and includes a limited collection of characters. Lundahl also stresses the importance of the setting of the story and suggests that the story should be set in a familiar cultural environment or/and provide a description of the surrounding that is explicit. Another important factor is language which according to Lundahl should be rather uncomplicated with preferably a lot of dialogue. The layout of the book should include a large and legible text accompanied by illustrations which help the reader with the interpretation of the story (78). *The Rock and the River* fulfills most of these criteria except the one about the familiar environment and the one about the illustrations. Yet this will not be a problem since the novel is read by students in Upper Secondary School English B-C course, therefore I believe the students are old enough to interpret the book without illustrations. Also the setting of *The Rock and the River* is less a hinder and more of a challenge for the students, since the book will take them to a different time and place in order to introduce to them the authentic background and history of the country. Furthermore *The Rock and the River* is written in the target language and is not adapted to a classroom for second language learners; one can therefore say that the book is authentic material which according to Lundahl contributes to the language learning process since it provides the students with the challenge of dealing both with 'real' language and culture. Collie and Slater also highlight the importance of authentic material and claim that it enhances students' vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, *The Rock and*

*the River* is an excellent book to work with in the English classroom since it can be combined with different activities and thus contribute to the students' all-round knowledge and skills.

### **What does the syllabus say?**

In this short section I will show which goals I have chosen to mainly work with and how they relate to *The Rock and the River*. The goals that I will focus on in the teaching of the subject of English through literature are the following:

- Understanding of spoken and written English, and also the ability to interpret content.
- The ability to express oneself and communicate in English in speech and writing.
- The ability to use different language strategies in different contexts.
- The ability to adapt language to different purposes, recipients and situations.
- The ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. (skolverket.se)

By looking at the competences described in the syllabus for the English course, one understands that *The Rock and the River* can be an excellent opportunity for the students to practice the target language in a variety of ways. In the section on classroom activity I will delve into the practical use of the competences to illustrate that *The Rock and the River* is a very appropriate book to use for different activities.

According to the syllabus, the content of communication in the English class should cover

- Concrete and abstract subject areas related to students' education and societal and working life; current issues; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; ethical and existential issues.
- Themes, ideas, form and content in film and literature; authors and literary periods.

- Living conditions, attitudes, values, traditions, social issues as well as cultural, historical, political and cultural conditions in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used. (skolverket.se)

About reading competences the syllabus suggests to aim for students to “improve their ability to read with good understanding literature in English and reflect over texts from different perspectives” (My translation, skolverket.se). Therefore it is important to provide the students with possibilities to analyze literature through activities that will intensify their reading experience and allow them to practice other competences concurrently. Likewise the syllabus gives emphasis to the importance that “students should be given the opportunity, through the use of language in functional and meaningful contexts, to develop all-round communicative skills” (skolverket.se). Communicative competence is something that is supposed to be worked with consistently in the English classroom and can be trained in for instance discussions of the book.

*The Rock and the River* can fulfill many more of the aims set by the syllabus with the help of a range of diverse activities created by the teacher. Many of the goals are automatically dealt with through the book since it is set in an English speaking country and portrays the political and social climate in the USA during the 1960s. As such the novel provides the students with an insight about of both historical and cultural differences between Sweden and the USA. The other goals will be incorporated through different sort of classroom activities that will be designed to train both productive and receptive skills as I will show in the next section.

### **Classroom activity**

*The Rock and the River* project will be dealt with in a time span of approximately eight weeks in order to give the students an opportunity to reach the goals that were previously stated and to practice the target language while working with the novel. Many activities around the themes of the book will be undertaken to prepare the students mentally and linguistically for a meaningful reading experience. This will be achieved with the previously mentioned method that Hedge describes as: Pre- while-, and post-reading stages.

A *pre-reading activity* can serve many purposes and is very beneficial in the language classroom since it enables learners to become familiar with a text/topic that may be new to them. Therefore it is important to provide the students prior to the reading process with relevant background information that contributes to a better comprehension of the subjects that will be treated. However, there are many ways to approach the pre-reading stage, which to a great extent depend on which goals the teacher has set up for the students to achieve in the particular project. In the case of the *Rock and the River* I chose to design my pre-reading activities in such a way as to provide my students with background information on the themes of the book as well as with vocabulary and other necessary tools to ensure that the students will be able to tackle the text language wise. Furthermore, I will prepare the students emotionally for the assignment since I plan on engaging them into a project which will deal with ethical questions. A suitable way to do this is through role-play where the students will act out different situations which can deal with issues such as discrimination. Through role-play students become aware of their own and others' way of thinking and develop a deeper understanding of a subject. Bolton and Heathcock emphasize in their book *So You Want to Use Role-play? A New Approach in How to Plan* the importance of exploring different roles in different contexts, in order to understand reality. According to them individuals acquire



understanding through role-play where they think, feel, and not least, react and respond to other characters. Different to theater, they claim, role-plays focus not on a result, but on the process which helps us to understand that reality can be perceived differently as different people interpret reality in their own way.

When your class engage in role-play they are not receiving knowledge or acquiring knowledge but making it – and they realize that they are doing so. When they leave your session they do so recognizing what they now know. This shift from the 'normal' passing on of knowledge to the 'making' of it calls on ones humanness in a way not normally associated with an instructional context. It is both challenging and exposing.

(57-58)

As homework during these eight weeks students will write in their logbooks about their thoughts on exercises such as the role-play and topics that were discussed in class. The logbook will function as a diary and record students' thought process throughout the project. By doing this they get a chance to process new information and work on their writing skills at the same time. Furthermore, it is important to mention that it is through writing that one can express oneself in a different manner and, more importantly, it gives the students more time to think about how they want to express themselves. The students will also be asked to share their own experiences of discrimination and answer questions such as

- Have you, or someone you know, ever been discriminated against? If so, what happened and what did it make you feel like?
- Did anyone witness it and if so, did she/he/they help?
- If not, what would you have wanted someone to do?
- Do you find it more difficult to speak up when you are with your friends and they are discriminating against someone? If so, why?
- What would help you to stand up against discrimination?

- Suggest five ways to stop discrimination.

I will create tasks in the beginning of the project to introduce the norms and values we will work with and let the students further explore them throughout the weeks, hoping for them to develop a mature and humane view on the issues we will discuss. This is a requirement for the book we will read since it deals with the topic of racism which will be addressed and discussed in the classroom where I will ask my students about their thoughts and what comes to their mind when they hear the word racism. To create a more interactive and dynamic discussion around this topic I choose to use the technique of mind mapping with the class which according to Hedge “generates ideas through individual reflection [which] are scribbled down and developed as the mind makes associations” (311). The mind map will be drawn on the blackboard so it is visible for all students. The reasoning behind mind maps is according to Hedge that “we do not think in an ordered or linear way, but rather explore a topic by moving between its various aspects” (310). It is important to note that the teacher’s role in these discussions will be rather passive since we want the students to reflect upon these issues themselves hence the board should present the students’ thoughts and views on the topic that is being discussed. However, the teacher’s role in these discussions will also be of importance since it will be him/her who will have to ensure that the discussion is kept alive and stays focused on the subject. To inspire the students to engage in the discussion, the teacher can ask leading questions which will be helpful if the students cannot come up with ideas.

Another advantage of mind maps especially when performed with the whole class is that students can inspire each other and also learn from each other while sharing thoughts and ideas. In these activities the target language will be used and students can learn new vocabulary with the help of the teacher or from each other while discussing. Here it is important that all students are equally involved in the discussion and another important factor is to make sure that a relaxed and supportive environment is created for all students in which

they feel comfortable to ask questions or present their ideas and thoughts. These exercises will hopefully awake the students' interest and entice their will to learn more about the subject.

The introduction of the book also plays an important role and should be carefully designed in order to keep the students' interest because if students lack motivation they will not be able to enjoy the book, or engage in discussions and activities. Therefore it is important that the students have knowledge about the history of the book in order to ensure that they will have an effective reading experience and also understand the significance of working with the different themes. In the pre-reading stage the teacher must also prepare the students with vocabulary that may be new for them and can be relevant in the discussion of the subject. Once the students have started to read the book, the while-reading activities can be planned. The book will be divided into an acceptable amount of 'homework'-reading material to provide students with enough information to process in the book discussions in class. The book discussions will be performed in such a way that the whole class engages in the discussion on the content of the chapters. Hedge writes that

teachers often worry about less structured fluency activities because there are problems to overcome if the advantages are to be enjoyed: for example, student's anxiety in formulating opinions or ideas about topics which may be unfamiliar and which they may never have discussed in their first language; the possibility of a few more confident, more extrovert, or more proficient students dominating, or of the teacher dominating in his or her efforts to stimulate a quiet group. [...] For these reasons, discussion usually needs support or structure of some kind. (277)

The teacher's role in the first discussions will be to ask generic questions to begin with, in order to make sure that all students are on the same track and have understood the content of the chapters so far. The students will then in later discussions lead the turn and the teacher's role will be to mainly work as a guide through the book. The reason for this is that I want my

students to be able to express their thoughts freely rather than try to think of what kind of answers are expected from them during the discussion, since this is not the aim for these lessons. I want them to reason about the issues that the author brings up and thus develop their analytic skills as well as their ability to listen and participate in a dialogue.

Bo Lundahl writes in his book that all students come from different backgrounds and thus interpret the content of texts differently. According to him this is an advantage for the language learners since it creates a foundation for a motivating and versatile discussion in the classroom. He calls this the reader's response, which means that we interpret texts based on our own background and knowledge by using ourselves as references (35). By engaging all students into the discussion the teacher can also check if everyone has done their homework and have come to the lesson well prepared. During these discussions the students are also given the opportunity to ask questions to the teacher and reflect on the story.

As a post-reading activity students will work in groups to do research about prominent figures of the Civil Rights movement. This assignment corresponds with the curriculum which states that student should "learn, explore and work both independently and with others and feel confident in their own abilities" (My translation, skolverket.se). Social skills and the ability to work in groups are of importance since they orient the students for future work and help them function in society. Stensaasen and Sletta write in *Gruppprocesser- om inläring och samarbete i grupper* that working together with other people can help individuals develop a positive self-image, since interacting with others in solving common tasks, acquiring skills and knowledge also leads to the development of positive expectations on oneself as a person and the people who are around you. These expectations then create the foundation for good relations and trusting communication (16). Furthermore it provides variety to learning which is favorable in the language classroom since it helps to keep the students' attention alive and also provides them with comprehensive knowledge.

Another factor that contributes to variety in the classroom is the use of different tools. In this assignment the students will therefore be encouraged to use media as part of their presentations such as PowerPoint, a slideshow with pictures, short clip etc. The curriculum states that “it is the responsibility of schools that students have knowledge of how to use books, library and modern technology as a tool for knowledge, communication, creativity and learning” (My translation, skolverket.se). Knowledge of tools is also advantageous and of importance for the learners’ self-studies outside the classroom. As the curriculum states “knowledge is a complex concept [and] is expressed in various forms - as facts, understanding, skills and experience – which all presuppose and interact with each other. Education shall [therefore] not emphasize one or the other form of knowledge” (My translation, skolverket.se). The aim of this activity, beside the benefits of variation in the classroom, is that students receive a deeper understanding of the novel and its historical background so that they feel well-informed on the subject and are comfortable discussing it with other people.

## Conclusion

As illustrated, this novel written by Kekla Magoon provides both the teacher and the students with a variety of ways to practice the target language. Through the various classroom activities students get to practice their productive and receptive competences, as well as other goals in the curriculum.

Even if *The Rock and the River* mainly deals with the Civil Rights movement, it is still full of depths to delve into. The students are introduced to a protagonist they can identify with, since it is someone who has to follow his parents' rules but also develops an urge to explore the world around him to find out for himself what he wants to believe in and what ideologies he wants to support. His encounters, the events around him and the pressure of his friends and family put him in a situation in which he must decide which way to choose and which consequences this will bear. The students in Upper Secondary School are in an age where they can relate to this problem and through discussions in class they receive an opportunity to share their thoughts about the difficult questions connected to adult life. The students will be able to empathize with the situation the protagonist Sam finds himself in by following his thoughts and encounters and even though the story does not deal with a current situation, it takes up a problem that exists even in our time and society: racism. Therefore this novel can be used to discuss important subjects such as oppression, racism, equality and social rights which play a significant role and contribute to the social development of the students. However, the book also mediates an important message to these young adults in which they learn from historical and cultural experiences and hence develop knowledge of fundamental human rights as well as a sense of ethical values. According to the curriculum the school's goal is that every student

- can make conscious choices based on knowledge of human rights and fundamental democratic values and personal experiences,

- should respect other people's self-worth and integrity
- should distance himself/herself from oppression and degrading treatment and help people
- can interact in meetings with other people based on respect for differences in living conditions, culture, language, religion and history
- can empathize with and understand other people's situations and develop a willingness to act with their best interests in mind (My translation, skolverket.se)

As such the novel fulfills the criteria of what is stated under norms and values in the curriculum which underline that the Swedish school system promotes equality and does not accept any form of discrimination. The teaching of literature is hence not limited to the training of solely reading competences but leaves room for discussions and other activities that provide the language learner with versatile learning methods that benefit both their linguistic skills and their cultural awareness. *The Rock and the River*, as shown in the section on classroom activity, can be combined with many other themes and subjects and applied to numerous activities that train receptive as well as productive skills. With that being said, I hope that language teachers are convinced that literature has a versatile use in the language classroom and benefits the students in many areas including their emotional growth and social life.

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