

# Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Harper Lee's novel as a basis for project work

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## Introduction

One could ask oneself what is the importance of reading, and why should anyone read? I would like to turn the question around and say, why not?

This is a pedagogical essay that will discuss the theory and practice of teaching literature in schools. The use of literature in schools is often limited to the reading itself, without connections to a broader perspective, or while-reading activities, followed by oral discussions, or book reviews. A different approach, putting the novel at the center of the teaching for a period of several weeks, is what I aim to present, suggesting coherent lessons with a theme to follow, instead of non-related chapters from a textbook. Harper Lee wrote the magnificent novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960. The novel gives the opportunity to teach about for example: language aspects, symbolism, culture, geography, history, family values, and moral questions. *Why* is *To Kill a Mockingbird* a suitable novel to use in the teaching, and *how* can it be used? are the questions to be answered in this essay. The project is aimed for Upper Secondary students, or adults.

Chapter one is a theoretical chapter that deals with what other people have said about using literature in the classroom. What can one gain from reading, especially novels? It will also discuss the teacher's role in choosing literature.

As a part of chapter two the questions *why* *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a suitable novel to use in the classroom, and *what* to teach from the novel will be addressed. Moreover there are certain features that both teachers and pupils need to be aware of, as well as understand in order to get the most out of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These will be explained in chapter two.

The third chapter is a description of *how* *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be used in the teaching, providing exercises that reach over eight sessions. The national syllabus for English is the main foundation of the chosen tasks.

## Chapter one

### - *Why* use literature in teaching

Why should anyone read, and what are the advantages of reading? These are the issues that this chapter will deal with.

The idea of extensive reading has gained support during the last years of the twentieth century. Schools all over the world started to offer their pupils different kinds of activities to motivate them to read more, in order to gain a better knowledge in a foreign language (Hedge 2000:200). The term extensive reading has been used in different meanings, where people's opinions about what it actually means go apart. As Hedge describes, "Some use the term confusingly to describe skimming and scanning activities on longer texts read during class time. Others relate it to quantity of material, for example 'fifty [books] per year' (Bright and McGregor 1997: 62). Yet others specify time, for example 'an hour per evening' (Krashen 1982: 183) or 'individual silent reading periods in class' (Hedge 1985: 94). [sic.]" (Hedge 2000: 202). In this essay extensive reading is interpreted as individual reading of longer texts (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) mostly at home. Raj and Hunt (1990), Davis (1995), Hafiz and Tudor (1989), and Robb and Susser (1989) have all done studies on extensive reading which showed that reading is very beneficial for English as a second language (ESL) learner. Hafiz and Tudor (1989) let Pakistani ESL pupils read after school for twelve weeks, and compared them to other ESL groups that did not. The result showed a significant improvement especially in writing skills (Hedge 2000: 200-201).

According to Krashen one can learn a language either through conscious learning, or through unaffected acquisition. He claims that conscious learning often requires a high level of concentration, and as a result there can be deadlock in the learning process. Acquisition on the other hand gives a better result, provided that the input is somewhat higher than the

pupils' current level of language knowledge (Lundahl 1998: 64-65). If one widens the meaning of Krashen's theory it could be conveyed to reading, and interpreted as if he also brings out the importance of using literature. Extensive reading can be seen as natural acquisition where the reader gets in contact with the language in an unconscious form of learning. Thus, extensive reading has an important role in language teaching, and it is vital to find a novel that is appropriate for the reader, in other words difficult enough to reach above the current level, but not too hard.

I am aware of the fact that some people might say that the choice of reading is important, and that the teacher needs to decide on a novel for his/her pupils with a suitable level of language and content. However, if starting with texts that are accessible to pupils (no matter what level of difficulty), the desire for something more challenging will come naturally. The harder you find a text the less enjoyable it will be (Simensen 1998: 141). The challenge is not to inspire good readers, instead it is to stimulate less proficient ones to read more. My own interest in reading started to grow while reading over twenty of Margit Sandemo's novels in the series "The Saga about the Ice people" They were not really seen as "good" literature, excluded as they were from my town's library, but they fascinated me and were the entrance to further reading. When I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as a student it was taught to me with tests, discussions, and lectures and I gained a lot of confidence from completing a grown-up novel in English. It also stimulated a desire for more challenging novels to read. The point to be made is that teachers need to encourage pupils to read, and it can be counterproductive to depreciate novels they themselves are interested in. One may spoil the fun, and at the same time lose all the benefits that reading provides. Another aspect to be discussed in this context is the choice between letting the pupils read the same novel, or pick individual ones. Either the teacher wants to be in control of the reading, using the same novel, or giving the pupils a chance to choose their own texts, from a class library, of their own interest (Hedge 2000:

215). Both methods are important. On the one hand: if you are to teach a novel to pupils, it would be a tremendous work load for the teacher to know thirty different novels well enough to be able to work with and analyze them. Control can sometimes be a good thing, giving the teacher a chance to help the pupils to understand a difficult novel, which is the case in this project, and examples of *how* to do this will follow in the third chapter. On the other hand: thirty different individuals are likely not to enjoy the same material, and to always “force” a novel on the pupils can be counterproductive. Thus a mixture of free choice and texts chosen by the teacher is desirable.

The focus so far has been on *why* anyone should read. I will continue by discussing *what aspects* reading has to language development among learners. There are several reasons to read. First, it simply is fun. No other genre can capture a person’s interest in a story, and make them lose track of place and time, as a good novel can. It also provides the opportunity to learn about different cultures, “go” to places you might never have a chance to visit, worlds that you could only dream about. Not only is reading fun, it is also developing for the individual, and helpful in creating a better understanding and acceptance of other people. Another important factor why reading is vital is its effect on the development of language skills. I share the opinion of Collie and Slater, who have divided the purposes of reading into four categories: valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement. Literature is ‘authentic’ material: meaning it is not fashioned for the specific purpose of language teaching. It allows the learner to cope with language intended for native speakers, as opposed to text books often made by Swedish authors to be used in Swedish schools. The cultural enrichment Collie and Slater write about is founded in the different cultures one gets an opportunity to take part of when reading a novel. Yet it also offers a full context in which characters from many different social backgrounds can be depicted. The reader can take part of the protagonists everyday life, thoughts, feelings, fears,

dreams et cetera (Collie and Slater 1987: 3-5). According to the national syllabus for English pupils are supposed to reflect over similarities and differences between their own cultural experiences and cultures in English speaking countries (Skolverket 2007). Therefore literature is of relevance for the teaching since authors have different backgrounds, and write about different cultural experiences. Maybe the most prominent reason for the usage of literature in the teaching is that when reading a substantial text one will gain familiarity with many features of language such as formation and function of sentences, the variation of possible structures, vocabulary, idioms et cetera (Collie and Slater 1987: 4-5). This implies that the whole progress of language learning, including writing, listening, and speaking will be improved through/by reading. The personal involvement is explained as when the reader is drawn into a text, and forgets to pinpoint individual words or phrases, and the development of the story becomes the essential matter. The reader gets emotional with the characters in a story, and the language becomes more transparent. I interpret this as similar to Krashen's thoughts about unconscious learning, the benefits of which Collie and Slater also seem to have acknowledged (1987: 3-6).

Another argument, comparable to Collie and Slater's language enrichment, is found in Hedge (2000: 194); "...encouraging extensive reading may help some students to build a knowledge of vocabulary and awareness of the features of written texts." She also writes about the importance of while-reading activities, emphasizing analytical activities that draw students' attention to linguistic features, preparing them for specific language difficulties they might encounter. This can be seen as Intensive reading which contrary to extensive reading goes into detail of the language, often narrowed down to a page or less. It involves looking carefully at a text, closely studying the features of written English, or looking words up, but also guessing the meaning of words with the help from the surrounding text (2000: 195, 202).

In the syllabus under goals to aim for one can read: "...ensure that pupils improve their ability to read with good understanding literature in English and reflect over text from different perspectives. [sic.]". Another goal is to be able to read, understand and reflect critically on non-fiction and specialist text (Skolverket 2007). These being the only guidelines for reading in the national syllabus for English, the studies and theories presented above all suggest that reading is highly beneficial for language improvement in general. As an example Simensen claims that studies have shown that good writers differ from poor ones by reading a lot (1998: 197). If believing this, reading can be connected to other goals in the syllabus, such as refining the pupil's ability to express themselves in writing, and speaking.

All the above ideas have influenced me when choosing the tasks to work with in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. For reading to be meaningful it has to be accessible, if you understand the language but not the message, or vice versa, you are unlikely to take pleasure in a text. Each pupil has different strengths and weaknesses; therefore it is important to provide a wide range of exercises so at least some fit each individual. Guidance and suitable texts are the recipe for success, and it is the teacher's responsibility to do the best he/she can to encourage reading, and offer strategies to be able to understand novels. Everyone should have the chance to enter the wonderful world of literature.

## Chapter two

### - *What* to teach from the novel

*To Kill a Mockingbird* provides topics that are still up-to-date in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and well suited for teaching. The focus in this essay will be on five different areas: language aspects, cultural studies, racism and punishment, literary analysis, and family values. Of course it is hard to divide a novel into different sections, and some of the areas will float into each other. The language aspect will cover different grammatical features as well as vocabulary. Cultural studies is hard to define exactly, but history, traditions, geography, and social knowledge are some of the ingredients in the concept that are used in this essay. The title for the area on racism and punishment has been chosen since those who are affected by racism often are punished: living in segregation, and victims of prejudice. The trial is also one of the major sources for racism in the novel, but it will also touch on moral issues like the death penalty, and historical events. The area on literary analysis includes devices like: symbolism, metaphors, irony, and genres, whereas family values discusses way of living, putting traditions in focus. In the rest of this chapter a plan of *what* to teach from the novel, and *why*, will be presented. Both teacher and pupils need to be aware of, and understand certain things in this novel. That is what I will explain, and emphasize in the discussion that follows.

It is natural to start with investigating the language aspect since the faster one gets into the language the easier the reading will proceed. However, this is something that will continue all through the project. Grammatical issues like abbreviations, spoken language, accent, vocabulary, word order, native language, writing styles, phraseology, and spelling will be dealt with in this area. (Grammar can be worked with more than suggested in chapter three, but groups have different weaknesses and strengths, and it is up to the teacher to decide how much, and what to teach.) A common problem in foreign language teaching is that the pupils

are not used to native accents, only the one used in the classroom. When the pupils get in contact with marked accents they have difficulty understanding what is said. *To Kill a Mockingbird* gives the reader an opportunity to get to know the American accent used in the South since part of it is written in spoken language in dialect. Lee uses a lot of abbreviations, and contractions like for example: “Ain’t hateful”, “I don’t want you hollerin’”, “Lemme think a minute...” as well as typical Southern expressions like “reckon” (Lee 1982: 14).

The key focus in cultural studies will be concentrating on the South and primarily Alabama. According to the syllabus pupils are supposed to “reflect of ways of living, cultural traditions and social conditions in English speaking countries, as well as develop greater understanding and tolerance of other cultures” (Skolverket 2007). In order to understand a country’s (or area’s) cultural traditions one needs to have some historical, geographical, religious, and social knowledge. These are the elements that have formed communities into what they are today. Alabama for example has a particularly interesting history. The state was a slave state which fought together with the Confederacy in the Civil War for the right to break free from the Union (*American Civil War*, Britannica). On page sixteen Lee has made an anecdote to this historical happening, when the state seceded from the Union. This should be taken into consideration together with questions like “where is the state situated on the map?”, “what are the main export products?”, and “what is the weather like there?”. Examples can be found in the novel, for example when Scout describes the weather: “There are no clearly defined seasons in South Alabama; summer drifts into autumn, and autumn is sometimes never followed by winter, but turns to a days-old spring that melts into summer again. [sic.]” (Lee 1982: 59). Many schools value integrated work between subjects, and a project with *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a start is an excellent way to work in an interdisciplinary way. Knowledge can not always be divided into different areas, or school

subjects, therefore interdisciplinary work is important. The novel brings out the history of the South, and its connection to today's society.

The racial issue can be seen all through the novel where the most significant example is the trial of Tom Robinson. As Durst Johnson (1994) observes "Tom Robinson's case bears striking parallels to the "Scottsboro trial", one of the most famous – or infamous – court cases in American history". In both cases the defendants are Black American men accused of having raped white women. The trial has a key role in the novel, with not only the matter mentioned above, but also all the racist acts that go on in Maycomb, the children's image of their father, and the fact that jury members are hard to find because they are afraid that their decision will hunt them afterwards (Lee 1982: 221). Alabama applies the death penalty at this time (Death Penalty Information Center), and Tom risks getting this punishment, just as the men in the Scottsboro trial did. Tom's trial does not only show racism it is also connected to the symbolism of the Mockingbird. He is accused and convicted, and he takes destiny into his own hands by trying to escape from prison, which ends up with him being shot. The newsman Mr. Underwood thinks it was a sin to kill cripples, and likened Mr. Robinson's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds (Lee 1982: 241). Atticus explains Tom's tragical assassination by saying; "I guess Tom was tired of white men's chances and preferred to take his own" (Lee 1982: 235-236). Tom knew that he and Atticus had a poor chance to win the case, since the odds for a Black man with a white jury were minimal. The jury ought to have given a verdict of acquittal, but a white man's word weighed heavier than a Black man's in Alabama in the 1930's. During the time of the story, Colored people in the South were somewhere on the path from being slaves to becoming citizens of full worth. They were no longer slaves, but lived separated from the white population, and segregation was common in these communities. Tom Robinson's case is not the only racial issue in the novel however; others include the Black maid Calpurnia working in the family's house, functioning as a

mother figure to two white children, the distinct line between where Colored and white people sit in the court room (Lee 1982: 160), and the reference that a lady makes at Aunt Alexandra's dinner party about a woman sitting at the wrong place, mixing Black and white people. This can be seen as a connection to Rosa Parks' act in Montgomery that took place during the time the novel was written (Lee 1982: 234). If pupils are to understand these acts they have to have some historical knowledge about slavery, the Civil War, Ku Klux Klan, and the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement was a nonviolent protest campaign against segregation in society, which eventually forced a breakthrough towards equal rights for African Americans in the South. Martin Luther King was the most famous activist, and Rosa Parks became an icon for the Montgomery bus boycott, after she refused to give her seat to a white man (*Civil Rights Movement*, Britannica). These are major events in the history of America, part of their common heritage, and ought to be included in the subject of English. Racism and cultural studies floats together since the history is the foundation of today's society, and as mentioned before, it is hard to draw a distinct division. These topics also move people, therefore they are good for class activities. Moreover, emotional questions can be easier to bring up in a historical context when it is not directly connected to the everyday life. Hopefully the teacher can create an open dialogue where pupils do not feel the need to defend their own position.

The literary analysis will focus on the symbolism of the Mockingbird, since it is the most prominent aspect. Connections to the Mockingbird can be seen all through the novel. It is a small bird, famous for its beautiful singing and seen as a symbol of innocence (Thomson 2007). Jem and Scout are not allowed to shoot mockingbirds since it is considered a sin. Miss Maudie explains to them: "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." (Lee 1982: 90). Tom

Robinson is one of the Mockingbirds (as has been discussed in the racism and punishment paragraph) the other prominent example being Boo Radley, an innocent victim who causes no harm to society. Even though he killed Mr. Heck Tate to save the children's lives, he is not prosecuted for the crime. Atticus asks Scout if she can understand this, and her answer is "Well it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" (Lee 1982: 276). The idea of the Mockingbird as a symbol of the innocent has an impact on many things throughout the story, especially when it comes to Scout's understanding of people. She learns not to judge people, you always have to look beneath the surface. In order to get the full picture of the novel pupils need to understand this kind of symbolism. As Edgar H. Schuster argues about Lee's writing; "is not that she has written another novel about race prejudice, but rather that she has placed race prejudice in a perspective which allows us to see it as an aspect of a larger thing; as something that arises from phantom contacts, from fear and lack of knowledge; and finally as something that disappears with the kind of knowledge or 'education' that one gains through learning what people are really like when you 'finally see them.'"(qtd. in Thomson 2007). Schuster's opinion is interesting; and maybe the clearest example of what he says is the way in which Boo Radley unexpectedly turns from being a source of fear among the children to saving their lives, thus he is found to be quite a regular guy.

The literary analysis will also cover different writing styles as well as elements like metaphors and irony, and genres. The children's superstition towards Boo Radley, his mysterious character, the mad dog that appears in Maycomb (Lee 1982: 93), the unusual snowfall (Lee 1982: 64), the house where Mrs. Dubose lives in, and her character (Lee 1982: 106), are some Gothic elements that appear in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The Gothic genre is characteristic for the supernatural, with elements like: thrills, demons, hobgoblins, heroes, darkness, haunted houses, and bandits. Often *how* and *why* a novel has been written is a reflection of previous literary tradition. Different trends follow each other, and this is a part of

the literary history that older pupils need to be aware of. By understanding the underlying messages in symbolism, irony or other literary devices, pupils will hopefully get more out of a text. With the novel as a starting point, a broader perspective on literature, including other genres, should be investigated.

Next area is family values. The Finch family breaks with the constructed expectations of a nuclear family since Scout and Jem are raised by their father (with the help from Calpurnia). The influence of two males might be the reason why Scout is a tomboy, not fitting into the ideal of what a girl is supposed to be like. Aunt Alexandra's appearance in the Finches' home, could be seen as a parallel to getting a stepmother. She tries to change the children and make them live up to their fancy family name. Even today family values are of great importance in the South, and one thing that strikes you when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that Jem, and Scout address their father Atticus by his first name. An unusual thing nowadays, but also back then, where the tradition was to call your parents mom, or dad. To what degree does your family form a part of who you are and your tradition vary from one ethnic group to another? These are natural questions to be discussed in this context. How do family values differ in different English speaking cultures?

Religion has a very strong hold in these parts of America, and Alabama is one of the states in the so-called "Bible belt". Many families form their social life around the church, and it plays a major role in people's lives, visiting church on Sundays is very common. When Calpurnia brings the children to her church it reflects a long lasting tradition (Lee 1982: 118). While reading about other cultures, pupils will hopefully gain more empathy with other people, since they get an insight in their experiences. Moreover it also helps with their understanding of the novel's plot.

These are the areas that will function as basis for the exercises in the next chapter, which will deal with how to work with the novel.

### Chapter three

#### - *How to work with literature*

*To Kill a Mockingbird* could be read just for entertainment, but why leave it there when the novel has so much more to offer. As a teacher you can choose between letting the students read a book, or you can actually teach it to them. Through activity while reading, it is more likely that all the pupils in a class will get as much as possible out of a novel, and hopefully in the end gain a deeper feeling of satisfaction. This chapter will show a suggestion on *how* to teach the novel. It is a model for teaching, exemplifying tasks to work with while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The chapters of the novel are divided into eight sessions (as a suggestion one per week, but it depends on how many lessons there are in one week, and their length), chapter 1-5, 6-9, 10-11, 12-15, 16-20, 21-23, 24-27, and 28-31, where different aspects are dealt with. Some lectures will be given, although activity among the pupils is the essential thing. The national syllabus for English will be the main foundation of the chosen tasks, as well as the skills: writing, listening, speaking, and reading. Hedge (2000: 210) claims that the general aim of while-reading activities is to encourage learners to be active as they read. Activities also function as a help to understand the novel as well as preserve the interest. As a teacher you need to help pupils with this.

To start with there needs to be an introduction that creates a sense of enthusiasm about the novel among the pupils. Introducing the teaching of novels, as Collie and Slater (1987: 16) argue, one should draw learners into a text as quickly as possible so that they want to continue reading. If the teacher manages to do this, the first challenge has already been completed. With this in mind an introduction is necessary. Initially, pupils will receive about ten key words from the first part of the novel, and then try to come up with ideas about the context. This task is in line with Collie and Slater's key word exercise (1987: 19), where the learners

get to be creative and use their imagination. Randomly chosen pupils get to present their ideas to the class. This will practice speaking as well as listening skills, which is one of the aims in the teaching. Next, a shorter presentation of the author should be made by the teacher. As a help to get started with the reading the teacher, or a recording, will read the first pages of the novel, thus when the lesson is over everyone will have started the book.

Lundahl (2001: 99) suggests that one way of describing reading is to liken it to a journey, where the reader needs to find out the answers to the questions: *where*, and *when* does the story take place?, *who*, and *what* is the story about? He points out that the earlier you find the answers, the earlier you are into the text. I agree with Lundahl, therefore the first session will start off with a class discussion, answering these questions. The reason for choosing this way of working is that the teacher can control the discussion, and direct it towards the aim that everyone has understood the first chapters. The southern accent is prominent in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and recurring expressions should be explained on the whiteboard, along with the pronunciation, since the class might not be familiar with the accent. Other English accents could also be taken into consideration. In the following activity, working with vocabulary, each pupil receives two words, and writes an explanation of them. The explanations are then read out aloud, and pupils get to guess the word. All words should be copied for the purpose of homework (Hedge 2000: 126). With reference to my own language intake, and positive response from teaching situations, I have found it very fruitful to talk about vocabulary. It is much easier to remember a word if one can relate it to something else than just the basic translation.

Session two starts with finding information about Alabama and the South, in order to prepare an oral presentation (approximately five to ten minutes). The Civil Rights Movement, slavery, weather conditions, export products, geography, the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan, Martin Luther King, religion, and America in the 1930's are topics that could be covered.

Knowing that oral presentations are hard for some pupils, this should be an exercise performed in pairs. The purpose is to improve their oral proficiency, along with gaining historical knowledge. Almost everything that happens today is a reflection of history, consequences of people's actions in the past. The Southerners' background has very much made them into what they are today, and therefore deepening the pupils' historical knowledge is of great importance in this context.

Literary writing has different genres, and during the third session the pupils should be given a compendium to read through consisting of, for example, different styles, techniques, famous writers associated with a specific genre, and metaphors. This will function as a broad introduction that can also be used further on in the teaching. When finished with the reading there will be an exercise suggested in Simensen's *Teaching a Foreign Language*. It starts with individual work, where the pupils are asked to answer questions on their own, then in smaller groups, comparing their answers to a friend adding new information, and finally, a discussion together in class (Simensen 1998: 145). General questions from the compendium should be mixed with more specific questions from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, focusing on the Gothic elements in the novel, and the symbolism of the Mockingbird. When the third step in the exercise is reached, the passage from the novel where Miss Maudie explains why not to kill a Mockingbird should be read by the teacher. The connection to the Mockingbird has an important function in understanding the novel from a broader perspective. The next task has a grammatical aim and deals with intensive reading. The pupils are asked to take sentences from the novel with grammatical difficulties like prepositions, verb forms et cetera, and leave blanks to be filled in. A change of papers is made, they should then answer someone else's paper (Collie and Slater 1987: 115). Instead of providing exercises in areas that the teacher thinks are problematic, pupils get to create their own, based on what they think is difficult. Thus, intensive reading develops the pupils' language awareness. Language features like

phraseology, grammar, and spelling are emphasized in the national syllabus for English (Skolverket 2007), and intensive reading improves the pupils' linguistic skills, and special attention should be directed through, class activities, towards increasing their knowledge.

In the fourth session the teacher will lecture most of the time. However, it should start off with a test on *To Kill a Mockingbird* consisting of simple questions about the characters, the plot, and things discussed during class. Many writers on teaching literature argue that the main priority for assessment is as measurement of knowledge (Simensen 1998: 286, Erickson and Börjesson 2001: 254, Hedge 2000: 376). However, it is my personal experience that this functions as a motivator as well. I base this statement on my time in high school, where my whole Spanish class did not do any homework since we never had any tests. In the final semester we got a new teacher, and by that time barely anyone in class had a passing grade. She gave us homework with follow-up activities, and we actually started to do them. This resulted in us getting better grades. I have never been an quick learner when it comes to foreign languages, and although I hated tests, they motivated me to study. Making reasonable demands on pupils makes them produce better results, and shows that the teacher cares about them. This test, as mentioned above, should consist of simple, straightforward questions enabling everyone to reach a high score since the aim is to motivate, not assess.

During the lecture, I myself would take the opportunity to share with the class my experiences from the time when I lived in Alabama and talk about family values, cultural differences and religion among other things. According to the syllabus pupils should reflect about ways of living and cultural traditions in English-speaking countries (Skolverket 2007). While talking about the South, traditions from other English-speaking countries could also be dealt with. Together the class could form a mind map on the whiteboard with the English language in the middle, then the countries speaking it, and from them draw lines of cultural differences. A class has a lot of experience within the group. Someone might be an

immigrant, or have relatives from an English-speaking country. Others might be familiar with traditions from being a tourist or through the media, and it is good to use the information that the group already has. When all the knowledge that the pupils have has been put on the whiteboard, the pupils could be asked to search for further information that can complement the mind map. Topics like traditions, family values, religion, and social expectations could be dealt with. This exercise also practices the pupils' ability to cooperate.

In the fifth session, the movie *A Time to Kill* directed by Joel Schumacher, based on a John Grisham novel could be showed to the class. The story is about a Colored man's struggle for justice for himself and his family. His ten-year-old daughter is raped by two white men and the fear of them getting off without punishment makes him take the law into his own hands and cold-bloodedly shoot the men in the courtroom (Chard 2007). The cases of Tom Robinson, Scottsboro, and the Black man from the movie are similar to each other, where a trial turns into a larger issue involving entire communities. Watching movies can, for some pupils, be more affecting and evoke a stronger emotional reaction than a written text. It is argued that if pupils are allowed to form their own questions, the questions they ask will be more relevant to their own developing understanding, based on what they think is difficult (Lynch 1996: 133). With this in mind, group work should be used, helping pupils to understand the connection between the movie, the novel and the historical case. The aim of this assignment is cooperation, helping each other and sharing knowledge in an active learning process. Movie watching exposes the pupils to "real" English, spoken by native speakers, but it can also be seen as a pre-activity to the following exercise and session. Vocabulary from *A Time to Kill* should be given as homework. Before moving on to the next session, with the purpose of holding on to the racial issue, an exercise called "the heated chair" should be done. A circle of chairs is formed, where every pupil takes a seat. Then the teacher reads assertions regarding moral issues like ethnicity, racism, and right and wrong.

If you do not agree with the assertion you are supposed to move to another seat, followed up by a discussion of the pupils' choices. This will make the pupils reflect over their own thoughts, as well as “develop greater understanding and tolerance of other people and cultures” (Skolverket 2007) which is a goal in the national syllabus for English.

After the film a role play could be set up. The students form a jury, a defense team, a prosecution team, and witnesses. Authentic cases (or made up ones) could be presented to the class involving matters like racism, prejudice and other moral issues; both sides have to come up with arguments, pro and con. The jury will make a decision of guilt or not. A number of pedagogical advantages have been claimed for role-plays such as encouraging participation by a large number of pupils. Some find it easier than a free discussion because they do not have to come up with original things to contribute; others just enjoy the opportunity to act (Hedge 2000: 279-280).

During the sixth session, an essay should be written in class on the topic, connected to previous activities, “the Death penalty, or not?”. The class has already been introduced to the subject as well as arguments in the movie and the novel; therefore it should be fairly easy to write about it. Writing is a good way to structure one's thoughts and analyze a text. In contrast to speaking, pupils get the time needed to think. Sometimes this brings out opinions that would not have been heard in an oral conversation. The pupils are supposed to write an argumentative text backing up their opinions with explanations. According to Raimes, “It has been said about writing that it is the ideal medium for getting it wrong, but also the ideal medium for eventually getting it right” (qtd. in Simensen 1998: 197). Next time the group is gathered, feedback should be given on the essays, their mistakes are just marked however, not corrected. The pupils get to correct their own mistakes, or take help from a friend. Being involved in the assessment encourages learners to think critically about their own competence, and thus raise their level of awareness (Tudor 1996: 162-163). There is a tendency among

pupils to put a graded paper away without having a look at the mistakes. If they are asked to correct their essays themselves, they will learn something, and eventually get it right.

The chapters read for the seventh session are full of important events, and as a warm-up activity the pupils are asked to form groups of five. The task is to summarize the last few chapters into five sentences. Each person in the group writes a sentence, then passes it on to their neighbor who writes the second sentence, and so on. When finished, all five summaries are passed to another group who choose the one they like the most, and read it out aloud to the class (Collie and Slater 1987: 86). The pupils help each other to understand the novel, and share their own interpretations. Next, there should be a speaking exercise, the discussions based on questionnaires. The questionnaire should be answered individually, reflecting the pupil's own standpoint on the moral and racial issues connected to the novel. The answers should then function as basis for group discussion, where pupils go through their opinions and explain their choices (Collie and Slater 1987: 71). Group work can be valuable for a number of reasons; it maximizes each learner's opportunity to interact, it reduces the psychological burden of public performance and learners tend to give fuller answers (Lynch 110-111).

The aim in the eighth session is to understand the novel, and the session should start off with a class discussion about who are the Mockingbirds? Atticus' and Scout's conversation in the last chapter could therefore be quoted (Lee 1982: 276). Does everyone understand the novel and what does Scout come to realize about other people, at the end of the story? It could be valuable here to listen to other classmates' thoughts and reactions. As a help to comprehend the novel, the following exercise could be a bingo game. The pupils are asked to write down the names of characters, major events, historical events et cetera from the novel in a squared system. The teacher will then read explanations and quotes from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and if pupils feel they have it on their paper, they mark it. (An example; "He puts things in the tree for the children", and they mark Boo Radley.) The first to get bingo

wins, and has to prove that they crossed over the right squares. The type of game is not as demanding as other activities can be, and is often regarded as something fun, even though it deals with important matters. Finally there should be another writing exercise. Studies have shown that good writers read a lot (Simensen 1998: 197), and both reading, and writing are great ways to improve one's language skills. Pupils are supposed finally to write a fictitious letter to Harper Lee telling her what they thought about the novel, mentioning their favorite passage and whether they learned anything from the book or not.

As a post-activity, the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird* could be shown, followed by a group discussion about the differences between the novel and the movie. Hopefully the whole class, despite its different levels of English, will have finished and got the message of a whole novel written for adults.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to show how the reading of an American novel can be used as a part of a project in English Studies.

Several studies have shown that reading in class can be very beneficial, especially when it comes to the writing skills (Hedge 2000: 200-201). This is not the only advantage with reading, it also creates a feeling for word order, sentence construction, language patterns, idioms, and vocabulary (Collie and Slater 1987: 4-5, Hedge 2000: 194). These are language aspects, but novels can, hopefully, also contribute to the personal development of individual pupils. Being exposed to literary texts creates a better understanding for other people, as well as an opportunity to learn about different cultures and historical events (Collie and Slater 1987: 4).

The harder you find reading the less enjoyable it can be (Simensen 1998: 141). However, this essay has tried to explore strategies to help pupils overcome the hardship a novel can present. Role-play, writing exercises, oral discussions, movie watching, and games are while-reading activities that can help with the comprehension of the novel, as well as preserving pupils' interest. The essay has also shown why *To Kill a Mockingbird* is such a great novel to use in teaching. Grammar, dialects, the Gothic genre, cultural aspects, Southern lifestyles, historical events and racism are only a selection of areas that can be taught on the basis of the novel. These topics are still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *To Kill a Mockingbird* also has a fascinating story that captures the teenage reader. If working with it in the way I have suggested in this essay, hopefully everyone in a class of foreign students of English can understand the message and enjoy their reading.

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