Students’ encounters with different texts in school

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Introduction

In western society today it is becoming increasingly important to have a formal education. An indisputable fact is that the usage of different types of texts constitutes a central and significant aspect of all forms of schooling, theoretical as well as practical. This means that no matter which type of formal training you choose, to a large extent you learn through written language. In other words, reading and writing different types of texts is of utmost importance when it comes to learning within all school subjects (Luke, 1995). Entering formal education also means encountering academic language, which in many ways differs from the well-known everyday forms of languaging (Bernstein, 1975; Halliday & Martin, 1993). For many students, teaching material varies from what they are accustomed to and prefer, i.e. the learning styles of these individuals are different from the predominant learning styles in school (Flemming, 1997; Tornberg, 1997). Aspects of the above mentioned character have proven to be salient reasons for problems and failure in school work. Many investigations into Swedish children’s, teenagers’ and adults’ reading ability show that in an international perspective, people in Sweden do very well on different types of reading tests, but there is a group of individuals (approximately 5%) which is placed far down on the comparative scale (Grunden för fortsatt lärande, 1996; The IEA Study of Reading Literacy, 1994). These individuals can only read very simple texts. Often they come from environments with relatively limited educational experience and tradition. Within this group we find people who have Swedish as their first and second language.
From a socio-cultural perspective (e.g. Säljö, 2000, Wertsch, 1991, 1998), ways of reading and writing in a specific situation are seen as the result of interaction between the reader/writer, the context, and the text/written the most prominent. The ability to enjoy reading and writing is, in other words, not absolute. It may vary from one situation to another, from one subject area to another. Transfer of the ability to read and write from one area to another, or from early age and onwards, can not be taken for granted. This is especially so for individuals less experienced in reading and writing. Students’ development of the ability to read and write must, therefore, be provided for in all different school subjects and during the whole school period. It must be an educational task for all teachers to be involved in.

But what does reading and writing look like in different situations and subject areas in school, how does it vary, and what are the conditions for this variation? These are questions we will try to answer in the project Students’ encounters with different texts in school. The aim of the project is to portray the text cultures in three different school subjects: Swedish, Social Science and Natural Science. Differences and similarities between the text cultures will be discussed in light of their inherent quality of limiting or encouraging written language development. Questions concerning aspects of inclusion or exclusion in a society where written language is an important skill, will be a part of this discussion. Different methods for evaluating and portraying the ability to read and write will also be discussed.

Data and procedure
The project consists of two parts. In the first part data is collected from grade 5 and 8, and from the second year in senior high school. The second part consists of an assessment of the pedagogical models developed while doing an analysis of the data during the first part of the project.

The individuals in this project are low achieving students who have Swedish either as their first language or as their second language. Students with specific reading and writing disabilities are not included in this investigation. As a comparison, a group of high achieving students is incorporated in each school year. Data is collected from sixty students in each grade (altogether 180 students). Thirty students have Swedish as their first language and the other thirty students have Swedish as their second language. In each of these groups two thirds of the students are judged by their teachers to be low achievers and one third to be high achievers. In each classroom, 5-7 students are observed and interviewed. All in all 9-10 classrooms are studied in each grade.

Data is collected during approximately one week. During this time, the general classroom learning environment and ways of working with texts in a specific classroom setting is observed. Texts used and produced are collected, and the students are interviewed about different aspects of their reading and writing of these texts. The students are also asked to talk about their reading and writing habits in general. Finally, the students’ teachers are interviewed about how they perceive the students, and are also asked to talk about the learning processes used in the classroom.

Aspects of investigation
In this project we will portray the text cultures of three different subject areas. In order to do so we will describe the students’ situated actions of meaning making in different reading and writing situations. These actions of the development of an “I” – a repertoire of positions

![Diagram]

Figure 1. The situated meaning making – social roles and organizations – cultures
meaning making are interpreted as a realization of the social roles the students bring to the learning situations, and the social roles they develop in these situations. The situated meaning making is also seen as an instantiation of the text cultures the students are a part of. Furthermore, we consider the positions they develop in the meaning making activities as being part of their identity (Figure 1).

The situated meaning making within reading and writing situations is captured through four different analytical perspectives:

1. Texts used and produced
2. How the student talks about and interacts with the texts used and produced
3. Observations of the learning processes
4. How the student acts within the learning processes

By combining these analyses we aim to present portraits of plausible text cultures and potential positions as readers and writers. One example of a reader position would be a student who is not dependent on the situation in which the reading takes place. This is a student who is also flexible in his reading and able to take a critical stance when needed. Independent of the learning process, this reader will be reading in different ways depending on what he wants to get out of his reading. A counterexample would be a reader who is very much dependent on an engaging reading environment. This student is flexible in reading texts that are situated in engaging learning processes. These are learning processes that invite and involve the student to be an active reader. Otherwise he becomes more or less a non-reader.

Needless to say, these are temporary portraits of the students. The portraits will probably look different for each individual at another point of time. These portraits can, however, be useful tools for a teacher in order to identify different reading and writing positions that a student may have. With the help of these descriptions, the teacher can see what his students most likely need in different stages of developing a repertoire of reading and writing positions. The analytical tools used in this project can also be used by the teacher to create individual pictures of students' reading and writing.

**Texts used and produced**

In order to describe the texts used and produced, four different analytical perspectives have been used\(^1\). The first approach has to do with the possibility for a reader to create a coherent understanding of the content of the text. In order to investigate this aspect, the macro- and microstructure of the text is studied. Primarily the genre structure of the text and the use of cohesive features are in focus. The second aspect deals with features used in order to engage the reader in his reading. Examples of this are instances of explicit dialogue, direct addresses to the reader, explanations of intricate words and formulations, and creation of 'difference' in meaning\(^2\) when different thoughts, ideas, presumptions, opinions etc. are dealt with or confronted. By analyzing the type of main referents used, the texts are, within the third aspect, described as to whether they belong to the sphere of everyday language or the sphere of more subject specific and technical language. The fourth aspect deals with the question of how information dense the texts are. The texts produced by the students are also analyzed based on their grammatical correctness.

**The student’s ways of interacting with the texts used and produced**

The interviews cover four different themes.\(^3\) The first theme deals with the student's reading and writing habits from a more general perspective and his pre-understanding of the texts used and produced. The second theme deals with how the student approaches the content of the texts. A third theme involves the student's ability to step out from the text and rethink what one knows. By means of these themes we will try to capture the student's way of interacting with the text on the surface and in depth, i.e. how flexible the student is when reading and writing texts. The last theme tries to capture the student's awareness of text function and structure.

**Learning processes**

The learning processes in which the texts are a part are observed in the classroom. They are also discussed in the interviews with the students and the teachers. We are interested in five different aspects of these processes.\(^4\) The first aspect involves the students' opportunities to be a part of the planning of the activities, which take place in school, and how their abilities, interests and experiences are met in the classroom activities. The second aspect concerns to what degree there are explicit plans and routines for the assignments

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\(^{1}\) This is based on work done by e.g. Beck m.fl., 1995; Carrell, 1982; Halliday & Hassan, 1989; Halliday & Martin, 1993.

\(^{2}\) See e.g. Kress, 1989.

\(^{3}\) This is based on work done by e.g. Appleyard, 1990; Borup Jensen m.fl., 1994; Cohen & Riel, 1989; Langer, 1995; Skrivepedagogisk forskning, 1993; Skriveteorier og skolepraksis, 1997.

\(^{4}\) This is based on work done by e.g. Dysthe, 1996; Elbow, 1991; Langer, 1999; Malmgren, 1992; Nationella kvalitetsgranskningar, 1998; Nystrøm m.fl., 1997; Säljö, 2000; Wertsch, 1998; Vygotsky, 1995.
carried out. Furthermore, the second aspect also includes if the students are given any goals for doing the assignments, if the function of the task is made explicit to them, and if they are given any scaffolding. The third aspect will give a picture of to what degree there are any discussions about the structures and functions of the specific texts. Fourth, the forms of expression used (e.g. reading, writing, art, drama, music and experiment) and way of organizing the work (e.g. individualized work and group exercises) are described. Included here is also different types of in-built progression in the work (e.g. from more simple to more advanced texts / text assignments). The last aspect deals with questions regarding if the work is based on the concept of 'difference', i.e. if difference in thoughts, ideas, presumptions, opinions etc. are used as an effective tool in order to create “new” or extended meaning and knowledge. The teacher's ways of creating a dialogical classroom together with his students are also described. Here we use an extended understanding of the concept 'dialogicality'. It includes questions concerning if there are any dialogues in the classroom, if the different forms of expressions used and ways of working are in dialogue with each other, and if the students' achievements in different phases of carrying out a task are put in dialogue with each other.

The student's ways of acting within the learning processes
The student’s ways of acting within the learning processes are observed in the classroom and discussed in the interviews with the students and the teachers. Three aspects are studied. First of all the student’s way of initiating and participating in the work and his way of motivating and reflecting upon his own way of working. Secondly we are interested in the student’s way of planing and structuring the assignments. The last aspect concerns whether the student is able to use ‘difference’ and ‘dialogicality’ on his own.

Ways of portraying the text cultures
The results from the project will be presented both in a quantitative and a qualitative manner. In the quantitative part of the study, each aspect presented above has been assessed on a scale from one to three. For example, a high degree of flexibility in the student’s ways of interacting with a text will be assessed as three, while a low degree or no occurrences of it will be given the value one. With the help of statistical models we will show different relations that occur between the four different analytical perspectives and between them and different types of background variables such as reading and writing habits, age, mother tongue and level of achievement.

The qualitative approach will in the first place, present pictures of the four different analytical angles: texts used and produced, the student’s ways of interacting with the texts used and produced, observations of the learning processes, and the student’s ways of acting within the learning processes. Secondly these aspects will be combined into more multifaceted pictures. The student’s way of interacting with text will be put in relation to the text, the actual learning process and how the student is behaving in this process. As an example we will describe here one of the observed students reading and writing.

The student and the texts
The student we choose to describe below is a boy in fifth grade, who has Swedish as his first language. He is a low achiever according to his teacher, and does not show much interest in school and considers writing to be boring. Reading can however be fun on some occasions. In the evenings he sometimes reads books. According to the boy he does not do his homework but he is aware that you have to be able to read and write later on in life – “not now, but later” as he expresses it – in order to get a good job. He wants to get into the same business as his father, i.e. to be working in a shop as a salesman.

During the week the boy is observed, among other texts, he reads a story in his Swedish class and reads another text in social science. The story is about a boy who competed with a giant about who could eat the most. The text in social science is about the great discoveries of other continents by Europeans during the fifteenth century. Below is an extract from the social science text:

Discoveries
Just like the Chinese people considered China to be the center of the world, the Europeans thought that Europe was in the middle of the world. When the Europeans arrived to other parts of the world they thought they had discovered new continents, despite the fact that there lived people there already.

6 The text in natural science will be left out here. Though, it could be commented that the boys way of reading in natural science resembles his way of reading in social science.

7 The text is translated from the Swedish original by the authors of this article. The text is from the textbook *Levande Historia, sk 5* (1991:58-59) [Living History, school year 5].
Merchandise from other continents
Even if the Europeans considered themselves to be superior to other people, they really wanted to get goods from countries in other parts of the world. Silk from China and ivory from Africa were very desired goods. But most of all the Europeans wanted to get spices from India. For example, pepper had the same high value as silver. Those who were trading spices could become enormously rich.

During the same week the boy also writes a story of his own, ‘text 1’, and writes about the Netherlands, ‘text 2’,\(^8\),\(^9\):

Text 1:
Once upon a time there were three witches who did not agree. One was mean, one was mean-kind and the last one was kind. The kind one and the mean one were angry with the middle witch so they changed her into a pig with wings. The mean witch kidnapped the kind princess Rosebud and changed her into a pig with wings. She missed with her fairy beams so the princess was not transformed. Then the princess went away again. The witch caught her again. She locked Rosebud up in a cave. Which was guarded by a dragon. But the kind witch had a white cat because she was kind and the cat smelled Rosebud and the kind witch got past the dragon. And saved Rosebud. And changed the witch in to a potato.
END of the story.

Text 2:
- facts about nl
- It has monarchy
- and it lives around 15 million people
  in the Netherlands.
- Capital Amsterdam
- Language Dutch
- Money 1 guld = 100 sent

\(^8\) The text in natural science will be left out here. Though, it could be commented that the boys way of writing in natural science resembles his way of writing in social science.

\(^9\) The texts are translated from the Swedish original by the authors of this article. Words misspelled by the boy in the Swedish original are in cursive in the English translation.

It is great danger for
flooding there fore
walls have been built. They are made
out of mud, stone and sand

Pictures of the texts used and produced
Both the story written by the boy and the story he read are examples of coherent texts about a concrete fictive event and they are expressed in everyday language. The information density of the texts is quite low. There are several features that engage the reader in the story about the boy and the giant. We also find some examples of these features in the story about princess Rosebud and the three witches. The grammatical form of the boy’s text is quite good with a few exceptions. The content and message in both texts are easily accessible and they are both context-independent.

The macro- and microstructures of the social science text about discoveries are, on the other hand, very complex and the content is fragmentized. It is a description of very general and abstract circumstances in the past. Many subject specific and technical words and formulations are used in the text about discoveries. The information density of the text is high, and it is not possible to detect any features which engage the reader in the reading. In order to read it as a coherent text a lot of knowledge about the subject area is needed in advance.

One problem in Swedish schools today is that many texts in textbooks look just like this social science text, which makes it difficult for anyone who does not already know the subject in question or at least is very interested in it, to read and to use this kind of text. The outcome can be seen in the boy’s written text about the Netherlands. He has read a textbook about the Netherlands and has tried to write a text on his own that resembles to some degree the text in the textbook. The boy’s text is quite dense with respect to information and it is very fragmentized. Also, the content is generally kept in a more subject specific language. There are no features to engage the reader. The text also consists of several deviations from grammatical and textual norms and it is more or less a condensed and obscure list of facts.

Pictures of a student’s ways of interacting with the texts used and produced
This boy is very quiet and does not say much in the interview. But it is still possible to see a small difference when talking about the different texts he has read and written. He is a little more open in talking about the two narrative texts than the social science texts. The stories seem to be texts that
are somewhat more vivid to him. These texts he comments on in different ways, and with some support from the interviewer, he is quite flexible in these texts. He also expresses some interest in the stories and can mention different features specific to the stories.

The text about discoveries covers a subject area that the boy says he has some knowledge about already. And with a lot of support from the interviewer he is also to some degree flexible in this text. On the other hand he shows very little awareness of the text as such.

When it comes to the text he has written about the Netherlands, it is difficult to engage him in discussion. He seems to consider this writing to be boring. The strategy he uses is to look for the headings in the textbook in order to find something interesting to write about. He then copies the text from the textbook. In this way he does not have to think so much on his own, he says. Consequently, he has no comments to make about the content of the text. This text seems to be more or less a lifeless text for him.

In the discussion about the first three texts it is possible to see that he is surely within his zone of proximal development. He can discuss the content of them if he just gets some scaffolding. Within this zone he is somewhat more active and initiates some aspects on his own in the discussion about the two stories. However, while discussing the text the boy read about the discoveries during the fifteenth century, he is more reliant on the observer’s questions in order to extend his answers to cover more than just a yes or no. When discussing the content of his written text about the Netherlands his answers are at best just a yes or no.

**Pictures of the learning processes and a student’s way of acting in them**

These texts have been created in somewhat different contexts. The story texts have been accompanied by reading of many different stories and open ended discussions about the students’ experiences of stories and what specific features characterize a story. Thus, before the students have started their own writing, they have had the opportunity to meet different stories and they have discussed them from different perspectives. This boy has also written his story in two different versions. It can be stated, conclusively, that this work has to a large extent been oriented towards the students’ own experiences and different forms of expression have been used. The work has a good structure, but the teacher has done all the planning on her own. Furthermore, the students have had the opportunity to discuss the structure and function of a story, and the work has to a large degree been imbued with ‘dialogicality’ and ‘difference’. These texts are created in an active language room.

Reading the text about the discoveries has been introduced with some more or less closed questions about the students’ knowledge of this historical period. The students have then been instructed to read the text on their own and to answer some already given questions about the text. So, the work in the introduction has to some degree been oriented towards the students’ own experiences. Some different forms of expressions have been used. The structure of the work is clear, but has been planned solely by the teacher. There is no dialogue at all about the text as such, its structure or function. In general, this text is not accompanied by much dialogue at all except for the introduction. ‘Difference’ is not used in order to create knowledge. It is a partly communicative room that we find here. It starts out with references to the students’ own experiences in a dialogical form, but the social communication then dies and the students are left on their own. They have to create the dialogue with the text, all by themselves if possible.

The text about the Netherlands has, on the other hand, been produced in more or less a communicative vacuum. The students have been instructed to choose a country in Europe to read about using different texts, which they choose on their own. The students are then instructed to either write their answers to some given questions, or write a text enclosing some keywords given by the teacher as scaffolds. This means that there is a clear structure in the work, but which has been planned exclusively by the teacher. The students’ own experiences or the text as such have not been in focus. There has been no dialogue and ‘difference’ used.

Thus, these learning processes are similar in that they all use well structured and different forms of expression, but the students are not involved at all in the planning of the work. On the other hand, these learning processes differ regarding in what way they engage the students in the work, and to what degree they give the students reasons to engage themselves in the work. Many discussions about the two story texts have to do with why you read such texts, what you can get out from reading them, and how they are constructed. An extended form of ‘dialogicality’ and ‘difference’ are in use in the learning processes for the story texts. This is not possible to detect in the learning processes of the other two texts.

The boy presented here is very indifferent in his way of acting within these learning processes. Independent of subject area or how the work should be fulfilled, he is quite indolent. He initiates neither any type of ‘dialogicality’, nor any ‘difference’ in his work. Still, he is doing whatever he is doing in quite a structured manner. Some small differences between the four learning processes are possible to identify, though. When it comes to the
work with the narrative texts, a minor indication of more involvement by the boy is possible to detect.

A combination of pictures
A combination of these pictures tells us that this is a boy with very low interest in and commitment for reading and writing. But when texts and text assignments are used that he has some interest in or some pre-knowledge of the content, he shows a somewhat more active engagement. The kind of genre used seems to be of importance to him. The narrative genre engages him more than the informative genre, which we usually find in social science and natural science. On this occasion, the reading and writing of narratives is supported by a learning process, which creates a communicative foundation and a social room for these texts. They are made alive. Fictive content could also be said to appeal to this student. This statement could be made even stronger if the historical text is also considered an instance of a sort of fiction. As a result, one could conclude that this boy is genre- and content-governed and needs a lot of communicative scaffolding in his work in order to be successful in his reading and writing. But in these cases he manages quite well. This means that this boy has the potential to read and write well.

A pedagogical framework for discussions of the results
A challenging pedagogical question is then how it would be possible to use this boy’s potential, his interest in narrative texts and more fictive content, in order to extend his reading and writing ability to also include a more active meaning making in other genres and involving other topics. A plausible answer would be to use literature and fiction as a starting point in courses in both social science and natural science, and then to let these texts work in dialogue with more informative texts and text assignments. Another question, connected to the first one, is how the learning processes could be created in all subject areas by using ‘dialogicality’ and ‘difference’ in order to find and make the most of this boy’s zone of proximal development. In other words, how can we in the learning processes see to that this boy will merge or become one with the texts and text assignments in a genuine encounter and meaning making activity?

The framework for a discussion of the results includes the pedagogical questions: Who is going to learn?, What is to be learned? and How is this going to be learned? (Figure 2. below). The first question comprises pictures of the student’s needs, motives and intentions, interest and attitudes, habits and conditions of life, earlier experiences and knowledge. The second question deals with pictures of the goals for learning, and the texts used and produced. The third question contains pictures of the learning environment and learning processes. These types of questions have to be answered if an individualized approach to learning is to be an effective tool in a practical pedagogical activity.

Figure 2. The Triangle of Learning

The answer to the question who is going to learn? directs what is to be learned and the answer to what is to be learned is motivated by who is going to learn. The answer to both of these questions further directs how this is to be learned. The way which something is to be learned is motivated by who is going to learn, and what this individual is going to learn. At the heart of the discussion stands the student with his/her special needs and presupposition for learning. The learning process with its different aspects constitutes the vital link between the learning individual and what is to be learned. As soon as the learning process is set into motion, the answers as well as the relationship between the above mentioned questions change. In other words, the learning process is seen as an active and dynamic process. Figure 2 is but an attempt to capture a momentary picture of the process and what it looks like.

Acknowledgement
This project is financed by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (1999-2002); Liberg, 1998.
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