Personal Growth through Literature
A Case Study of Using Letters From the Inside in Teaching for Swedish Lower Secondary School

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Abstract
This thesis investigates ways in which literature, in this case the novel *Letters From the Inside*, can be used in teaching English and how it can support personal growth. The teaching is undertaken in the context of reader response, which basically means that readers use their previous knowledge to interact with texts. Langer’s envisionments and Chambers’ Tell me-approach serve as the theoretical framework; both are related to each other and to personal growth. The selection of books is discussed and the importance of choosing a book that is relevant for the pupils is pointed out, as well as the obvious statement that motivation rises when the chosen novel is appreciated by the reader who has affinity with the characters. Conclusions drawn are that personal growth is a wide concept, for which interaction is important, since it may increase the understanding of others. A tolerant and safe classroom environment is necessary, especially if you want pupils to discuss personal and perhaps, subjects that are sensitive to them.

Keywords
Personal growth, development, literature, understanding, envisionment, Tell me-approach, booktalk, self-confidence
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1 Introduction

In lower secondary school in Sweden (years 7 to 9), pupils are in the beginning of their adolescence, during which their physical as well as mental development is given an impetus. Maria Nikolajeva discusses adolescence in *Reading for Learning* as a period of “identity formation” (141). Adolescence, could be argued, is the very middle of peoples’ personal growth, since they are leaving childhood and entering adulthood. During this time, they may be insecure of their emotions, thoughts or, above all, who they are and how they should act. Also, they start to question themselves and the surrounding environment and become more aware of their identity, as opposed to when they were younger. During this time of uncertainty, school needs to be a comfort zone for pupils where they feel acknowledged and have the opportunity to talk about for example the change they go through during adolescence, emotions, ethics and morals. For this purpose, literature is a great tool, since pupils can use their own experiences and compare their lives to those of the characters present in a work of fiction. Annie Simpson states in “Teaching for Personal and Spiritual Growth” that “the teacher and the learner foster each other’s growth” (65), which is why a healthy teacher-student relationship must be established and confidence on both sides is important. Teachers must show belief in that the pupils can achieve their goals. Jeremy Harmer discusses the teacher’s role as a tutor, in *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Acting as tutors, Harmer states, can be difficult but still extremely important, since, in the personal contact that arises, “the learners have a real chance to feel supported and helped” (110), and to feel that they matter.

The *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre 2011* expresses that school should “stimulate each pupil towards self-development and personal growth” (12). This quote is an important premise for this
thesis, as this thesis deals with supporting pupils’ personal growth through literature. Pupils should be able to grow and develop at their own pace, and for that purpose a safe and accepting atmosphere is required. Not all pupils have the possibility, or the interest, to read in their spare time and everyone has different experiences from reading. Especially for the pupils with bad experiences from reading, literature is important to involve in the language classroom in an interesting way. With that is, however, not meant that the focus should be only on pupils with bad experiences. Pupils that already like to read should be equally cared for, in order to enhance every pupil’s interest for reading. This is supported by the statement in the syllabus, which expresses that “a wealth of opportunities for discussion and reading” should be provided in school (11).

As can be seen, reading and discussing are connected with each other. The content of every novel and, above all, pupils’ different interpretations can be discussed and exchanged. How pupils respond to texts, though, depends much on their background, previous experience of similar texts or topics, and their current state of mind. In *The Implied Reader*, Wolfgang Iser explains that “the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence” (275), and Louise Rosenblatt continues in *The Reader The Text The Poem* with the fact that the reader of any text must draw on past experiences (22). Both describe the part of literary criticism called reader response, and from the quotes, it can be understood that meaning is created in the meeting of texts and readers with unique experiences. In addition to this, Nikolajeva clarifies that “reader-response theories deal with how readers interact (…) with fiction” (8), since everyone responds differently. In a class with approximately 25 pupils, everyone has various experiences and by sharing these experiences, with a novel as a starting point, the reader can make new disclosures and widen their vision. At the same time, other pupils could learn and expand their understanding of the text and their understanding of others. According to the curriculum, school should “encourage all pupils to discover their own
uniqueness as individuals” (Skolverket 9), and this goal may be supported by letting pupils share their different experiences.

This project aims to foster personal growth, and it attempts to do this by generating discussions through reading and analysing a novel. John Marsden’s novel *Letters From the Inside* (1991) has been chosen for its complexity, and therefore allows opportunities for analysis based on ones’ own personal circumstances and experiences. First and foremost, it is a young adult epistolary novel. The protagonists of the novel, Tracey and Mandy are around 15 years old, the cusp of womanhood. This is roughly the same age as pupils in year nine, and may strike a chord of recognition of themselves in the characters’ correspondence. Mandy has a violent brother but, apart from him, the other characters are not well presented. Amos Paran writes in “The Role of Literature in Instructed Foreign Language Learning and Teaching”, that when pupils read literature adapted for their age and thus is intended for them, for example when it comes to topics, characters, and genres, they respond particularly well to texts (489). Similarly, Gillian Lazar discusses the selection of material for reading in *Literature and Language Teaching*, and argues that books are to be chosen on the basis of appropriateness in relation to students’ interests (24). However, a class usually consists of 20-30 pupils and it is impossible to always see to it, that the novel deals with each and every pupil’s interest. They meet and interact with the text in various ways, thus create their own meaning. Oftentimes, pupils are forced to read the classics (or a few of them) and, since the classics are rather old, pupils may feel that they are not interesting, nor relevant, and oppose themselves to read them. By that is, however, not meant that pupils never should read any of the classics. The syllabus points out that the teaching of English should involve various contexts where English is used, regional as well as social, and history being part of social contexts is only one reason for reading the classics.
Letters From the Inside is a relatively new novel that treats existential, identity and lifestyle questions, as the girls, Tracey and Mandy, write about their lives, what they do and how they feel about things. These matters are all relevant for pupils at the intended stage. Apart from the topics, the novel contains features that pupils might find interesting and exciting. One example is that there are words and expressions typical for the Australian English, since the novel is set in Australia, and pupils are used to British or American English. Another example is that the novel is composed of letters, and therefore the reader experiences the novel through the girls and their perception of the world. Lastly, the novel is not very long, which may deceive pupils to believe that it is easily managed, and thus they might start the assignment with a positive attitude. Although the novel is not very old, much development has happened since it was first published. The internet has expanded and people do not send handwritten letters as much as they used to. The concept of having a pen pal has become antiquated. That does, however, not mean that Letters From the Inside could not be used. On the contrary, the novel might expand pupils understanding of how people lived only ten-twenty years ago, which is not a very long time.

Exploring different approaches and pedagogical methods, the aim of this thesis is to investigate different ways in which literature can be used for supporting personal growth among Swedish pupils in year nine. For this purpose, Letters From the Inside is used as a case study and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework, which will be presented in the analysis. This is important since pupils should grow up to be “active, creative, competent and responsible individuals and citizens” (Skolverket 11). Since the pupils are developing and changing they may make choices of decisive importance that will affect their future, of which school has an important role to play in raising awareness. To fulfil the purpose of this essay, the didactic methods that are discussed
will be situated within the framework of reader response, which was briefly presented above, and used with teaching ideas suitable for the primary text.

In the following section (2. Theory), personal growth is defined by Carter & Long. Their Cultural Model offers examples of what can be achieved by using literature to teach language. Further, the cultural model offers angels to enhance personal growth. In addition to Carter & Long, the lexical definition of “personal growth” is described to give focus to the curriculum usage of this term. Thus, there is no ambiguity about the use of the term personal growth within discussions about the curriculum’s aims. This paper also discusses the process to select books that would benefit teaching language. Finally, Judith Langer’s idea of envisionments and Aidan Chambers’ Tell Me-approach serve as the theoretical framework for this thesis. These two strategies form the context of reader response theory.

In the next section (3. Analysis), Letters From the Inside is in the centre of attention. The novel is related to personal growth, and possibilities on how to achieve the goals of stimulating pupils towards personal growth and give them the opportunity to feel the joy of development are discussed. Ultimately, in the last section (4. Conclusion), some concluding comments are submitted and thoughts about further research on this matter are discussed.

2 Theory

In Teaching Literature, Carter & Long thoroughly investigate the use of literature in English teaching and describe personal growth in relation to literature. They state that “helping students to read literature more effectively is helping them to grow as individuals as well as in their relationships with people” (3). Personal growth is mainly about the individual and their development into a mature adult, which is also the
definition in a lexical sense. Collins English Dictionary defines personal growth as “development as an individual” and Merriam-Webster uses the term in an example sentence that is as follows: “He sees his college years as an opportunity for personal growth”, which means that the boy in the sentence sees an opportunity for great development. The process does, however, also include relationships and accepting people for who they are, which can be supported by giving pupils the chance to interact and exchange experiences. Tolerating other people is usually a matter of understanding, since people may be afraid of what they do not know. By teaching literature with the cultural model as a starting point, Carter & Long state, literature guides people to learn about and understand people with different backgrounds, and thus different from themselves (2). They argue that, since literature “expresses the most significant ideas and sentiments of human beings”, pupils can learn to appreciate each other, their function in society (2-3), and the fact that everyone is different. No one must be judged by anyone who has not tried to understand their background, and what has made them who they are today. Thus, teaching with a cultural model-approach may result in appreciation for other cultures and individuals, as well as for the society and culture, in which the reader exists. Nikolajeva supports the latter with stating that “it can be argued that the most important knowledge readers acquire from fiction is the knowledge and understanding of themselves, including thoughts, emotions, beliefs, assumptions, intentions, and behaviour” (141), which are all matters that should be dealt with in school. She also points out the importance of self-knowledge (141), and that everyone benefits from it. Self-knowledge is important for personal growth, because pupils have to know themselves in order to be able to reflect on themselves, their thoughts, and their emotions.

The curriculum focuses much on the individual and their personal growth. For example, it says that “every pupil has the right to develop in school, to feel the joy of
growth and experience the satisfaction that comes from making progress and overcoming difficulties” (13). When people manage to exceed their abilities, they may gain confidence and want to challenge themselves further, thus growing up with much useful experience. In school, pupils are supposed to be challenged according to the zone of proximal development, which Harmer explains means that they are at a stage where they are accessible to the new thing they are supposed to learn and take it in together with others (59). Working together, it will be seen, supports the personal growth of everyone involved, since they learn from and can help each other. Since pupils attend school for the same reason, they should be encouraged to support each other, and develop their communicative skills. The curriculum presents these four all-round communicative skills: reading, speaking, listening and writing, and obviously, criteria for the skills are provided. All of these skills are to be practised and developed in school, since as the pupils become more proficient in their usage of the skills, they too mature. Also, speaking and listening requires that conversations take place. Seeing that pupils in the same class should be approximately at the same level in their knowledge of English, which in practice they are not, they benefit from talking to each other. Through talks pupils exchange experiences and may pick up new ways of expressing themselves, which, as well as self-knowledge, is important for the development as a person. However, it cannot be determined when (or if) a person is fully developed, since there is always more to learn.

Much learning happens through reading, and in school, texts of various kinds, especially books, are used every day. What is important to remember is that the choice of books may not necessarily always be decided by the teacher. In Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk, Chambers states that “those who choose [the book] are exercising power” (151), as it is an activity of high-value, and thus pupils may sometimes choose a book themselves. Then again, if pupils choose, they should argue for the relevance in
order for the teacher to approve of it, which means that the pupils have to have done some research about it. The content of the novel should fit into the aims in the syllabus. It should not be too easy, nor should it be too hard, but rather just enough challenging and, above all, it should be relevant. In *The Culture of Reading and The Teaching of English*, Kathleen McCormick uses the phrase “a matching of repertoires” (87), when describing the choice of books to use in a class. The matching happens when pupils are satisfied with the novel, and the novel reaches up to their expectations. McCormick also uses the term *mismatching* for when certain information is missing, and thus the novel disappoints the reader, in terms of the story or the characters or theme. The term *tension* is used for explaining the situation when the reader knows just enough of the text but disapproves of it (87). The ambition should be to always achieve a matching, but it is problematic to find one novel that suits 25 different people with different interests and backgrounds. If the reader appreciates the assigned novel, the motivation to read it may rise. Sometimes, though, pupils have to read books that do not seem very favourable, for example in school. This step could be seen as a step forward in their personal growth, since it may have their eyes opened to new experiences and understandings.

Every time people read, they search for meaning, more or less consciously, and, in *The Act of Reading*, Iser explains that this search for meaning is natural and happens unconditionally (3). Thus, it can be argued that the book’s message is not relevant to reflect upon until during discussions after the novel is finished. In this case, the message is to be discussed after having finished the novel when the pupils’ envisionments are developed. The envisionment may be well-developed or still in the making, and irrespective of which, they may be more developed through booktalks, for which Chambers’ Tell me-approach is useful. Langer’s envisionment-building is an individual process and happens during the reading, but also afterwards, and can be discussed in the context of Chambers’ model for booktalks, which will be explained below.
2.1 Theoretical Framework

In “Thinking and Doing Literature”, Langer explains her idea of envisionment-building, which describes one angle of the reading process that happens individually:

When people read, write, speak (when they think), they develop
“meanings in motion”, meanings that contain questions as well
as already-formed ideas that will change over time – a process
that I call “envisionment-building” (17).

Below, the five stances, which Langer presents as parts of the envisionment-building, are presented and discussed in the context of personal growth. Subsequent to the discussion, Chambers’ Tell Me-approach is presented in order to discuss possible approaches to teaching literature. Since personal growth is an individual process and hence different for everyone, various approaches are necessary.

In Envisioning Literature, Judith Langer explains the idea of envisionment as “the world of understanding a particular person has at a given point in time” (10). She claims that envisionment-building is not bound to literature but happens all the time when people try to understand. In this case, however, envisionment-building is focused on the reading experience, and Langer stresses the fact that “understanding is interpretation” (16), and for the envisionment-building, interpretation forms the basis. Interpretation, should be noted, is non-measurable, and it cannot be said that one interpretation is better than another – as long as it is not a factual error. For the building of envisionments, Langer presents five stances. Each stance is the particular world of understanding, which the pupils have at a certain point during their reading, since interpretation happens continually during the reading.
1. **Being Outside and Stepping into an Envisionment:** This stance occurs throughout the reading, not only at the beginning when the reader encounters new ideas. By using previous knowledge and experiences, the reader searches for clues and seek meaning which is usually superficial at this stage. (17)

2. **Being Inside and Moving Through an Envisionment:** The personal knowledge, the text and the social context stimulate to further thinking. In this stance, people engage in their envisionments and keep the envisionment open for change. (18)

3. **Stepping Out and Rethinking What You Know:** Here, the text-world and the understanding of the text are used to expand the reader’s knowledge and experiences. When the novel reminds her of something she experienced before, it forces her to use her envisionments and reflect on her feelings. (19)

4. **Stepping Out and Objectifying the Experience:** In this stance the text and meaning is seen from an outside perspective. The reader distance herself from the envisionment in order to be able to reflect on it. Understandings, and interpretations, reading experiences, and the novel are objectified, analysed, and judged. In this stance, the reader detaches herself from the text and its meaning and look at it in an analytical way. (20)

5. **Leaving an Envisionment and Going Beyond:** This stance occurs when envisionments are well-developed and the reader can use her knowledge in new and unrelated situations. However, it does not occur as frequently as the other stances. (21)

Although the stances are put in order above, Langer states that they do not occur in a straight line, but vary from reader to reader and reading to reading. Therefore, it is impossible to say in which stance the readers find themselves, unless they have a chance to discuss and together develop their interpretations. As can be seen in the descriptions of the stances, some requires a more intricate interpretation of the reading, and through discussions, pupils can help each other understand details and get a better insight into
the novel. Neither do all readers necessarily enter every stance, but the more stances a reader reaches, the more developed she is. Entering the latter stances indicates that the reading becomes more effective, which Carter and Long state is supportive for personal growth. Through interaction, pupils can develop their envisionments together and share in groups. By sharing experiences, of which the envisionment is a sort, pupils can widen their understanding for each other, and the understanding for other people is a part of personal growth. The most frequent stance is the second one, since it is during this stance that people are the most active and open for developing their interpretations, which is simply done through discussions.

Starting a conversation is, however, not always as easy as it sounds, especially not when the topics of discussion are emotions and/or one’s own experiences. No matter how well developed a person is, discussions about emotions may be tough and sensitive. Thus, questions with potential for opening a discussion in a way that approve of the pupils’ independent thinking are necessary. Relating the questions to a novel may also support the discussion. Pupils may start with talking about the novel and then let the conversation pass on to talking about their experiences and relate to the characters in the novel, thus they can decide for themselves how much about their personal life they want to reveal. Chamber presents the *Tell Me*-approach, as follows:

*Tell Me* is about helping children to talk well about books. And not only talk well but listen well. (...) And talk well not just about books but about any text from one-word signs to the writing we call literature, which is the kind of text I shall be concentrating on (97).

Further, Chambers explains that learning of talk well about books helps pupils to articulate better about other things, and not only about books. The more various things pupils can talk about, the more their vocabulary expands. As they learn to express
themselves in new ways they develop not only their language skills but they also develop as individuals. The most important to remember when using this method is never to say “why”, but rather “Tell me”, since it indicates that the teacher actually wants to know more, and, since it supports further conversation. By signalling that the teacher is interested in what the pupil has to say, the pupil is encouraged to talk more and may feel that their opinions matter, which may support their personal growth in a way that their self-confidence grows. They feel more confident and might attempt taking the space they deserve in class. Simply asking “why”, Chamber argues, may put the reader in an uncomfortable position, since it “too often sounds aggressive, threatening, oppositional, [and] examinational” (136). Those are characteristics that do not fit into the context of booktalks, and should not be met with in school at all.

Before any talk, a careful preparation is necessary. It makes talking in front of a group easier and more relaxed, since the speaker might not be as nervous as she would be without any or with little preparation, and thus it could strengthen the pupils’ self-confidence. Preparations are necessary not only for presentations, but also for booktalks, and Chambers presents different possibilities to add to the Tell me-questions. The How, apart from the questions, he calls “four kinds of saying” (109-11), of which the idea is to speak and think about what is being said. First, you say for yourself, and this phase includes, for example, a reflection on thoughts, and formulation of arguments. Then these thoughts are to be said out loud in order to hear what is otherwise only being thought. Saying the new bears upon the idea that the booktalk provides better understanding, which is an idea that recurs during the discussion of personal growth. At the stage saying to others, the listeners must try to understand, and together the group can widen the individuals’ critical thinking. Simultaneously, saying together requires everyone in the group, and their collaboration, since this saying is used to solve a problem someone cannot solve by oneself. This is not necessarily a
discussion, but talking is required. Above all, talking and explaining in a way that everyone can understand, is important. Also here, pupils must adjust their language in order for everyone to be able to understand. This means that pupils learn from each other and thus may support each other’s personal growth.

For the actual booktalk, the Tell Me-approach includes three sorts of questions: the *basic*, the *general*, and the *special* ones. Chamber points out that the list is “intended solely for the teacher’s own convenience and should not even be shown to students” (177). If this approach is used frequently, Chamber explains, the framework leaves an impress and eventually, it is not consciously used (181). From the approach can be learned to listen more carefully. Also, as the pupils generate their own questions, the approach may expand. The list of questions is long but the intention is not that every question should be answered every time, but rather the questions that are relevant for the pupils and the current novel should be discussed. Nor are the questions to be followed to the letter, but rather to be adapted to the pupils and to the situation, and, since they are used in a booktalk – a conversation – the questions must be organised so that they follow the conversation. Some questions are given as examples as the different sorts of questions are described, and some are used as examples in the analysis. The full list of questions is attached in the Appendix.

The basic questions cover the ones that everyone can answer. For example: Was there anything you liked or disliked about this book? Those may not be seen as very complicated questions, but for the insecure pupils it may be a step forward simply to answer them and argue for their thoughts. Moving forward, the general questions can be seen as elevating the conversation to a higher level, thus challenging pupils, as it requires them to having thought about what they have read. One example is the question if anything that happens in the novel has ever happened to the reader, a question that can direct the talk to be about experiences and emotions. Lastly, the special questions
are to be used if the booktalk becomes stagnant. They are questions about the narration, characters, and about the story (172-74, 177-81). Those too are questions that everyone can answer, but they do require more thinking and sometimes arguments for the answers. Some of the questions might be challenging for the pupils but as long as the challenges are not too hard, it is through them they grow and develop.

To sum up, the notion of personal growth includes many aspects, but altogether it is about developing as a person and growing into a mature human being. In this case, it happens through literature in the frame of Langer’s envisionment-building and Chambers’ model for booktalks. Similarly, the curriculum expresses, in different ways, that school should support pupils in their growth. Carter & Long state that literature supports pupils in their growth, and thus, the importance of selection is briefly presented, and will be further discussed in the next section. Langer’s five stances for envisionment-building, as well as Chambers’ Tell me-approach are presented above as the framework for this thesis and will, in the next section, be placed in a concrete didactic context.

3 Analysis

As stated in the introduction, the lower secondary school is the time of peoples’ lives when they change the most and may be insecure, and thus take on an overconfident attitude to protect themselves. Therefore, the selection of novels used in teaching during this period is important to take into careful consideration. However, no specific books are determined in the syllabus. It is up to the teacher to decide but to their assistance they have the section called “Contents of Communication”, which describes what content the teaching of English should include. One aim, which is wide and could include plenty of books in different ways, is, “living conditions, traditions,
social relations and cultural phenomena in various contexts and areas where English is used” (34), and one way to discover this is through literature. The aim could also support pupils’ understanding for other people, and this, in its turn, supports their relationships with other people. In the theory section, it was pointed out that Carter and Long state that relations with other people is an essential part of personal growth. It is of common knowledge that the motivation to read rises when the chosen book is considered to be good or relevant. The views, of what a good book is, however, differ much, above all in terms of characters, themes, topics and genre, and since this project is hypothetical, there is no class to which the choice of book can be related. When McCormick’s intentions with “matching of repertoires” (87) succeed, readers might want to share their experiences. Since the term matching refers to a successful choice of books, the reader shares her enthusiasm. Sharing enthusiasm may inspire other pupils to wanting to know more or to read the novel, although it might be a book of which they would not fully approve from the beginning. However, as stated in the theory section, reading a novel from a genre that usually is not of one’s favourite, is a progress in the reader’s personal growth. The reader acquires new insights and widens her views. Since *Letters From the Inside* is directed towards teenagers, and the main theme in the novel is friendship, the probability that pupils in lower secondary school will like the novel is rather plausible. Several kinds of friendships may be found, thus widen the understanding for other people and their relationships. The novel is also set in an environment that reminds of the theme crime and punishment. In textbooks used in schools, crime and punishment is a theme that is usually considered in one chapter. From this specific novel, a slightly different version of friendship may be experienced, which may develop into a wider understanding of other people than before. Relationships, whether it is friendship or partnership, should be well-kept, and literature may inspire people to tend to their relations. Still, teachers can never be certain that
pupils will enjoy reading the chosen novel. The matching of repertoires will not always succeed, and if a mismatching occurs the presentation of the novel does not matter very much. However, by drawing on my own experiences as a teacher trainee and student in Sweden, pupils usually give the chosen novel a chance since it affects their grades, and, since they may get the chance to choose a novel of their own the next time.

Now that the selection of books has been discussed, Langer’s five stances are to be considered in relation to personal growth and *Letters From the Inside*. In the theory section, Langer’s statement about the stances not following a straight line was pointed out, although it could be argued that they do somewhat follow on each other. The latter stances are more analytical than the previous. Hence, the reader preferably should have entered the three first stances before she enters the fourth and fifth, and as will be seen below, they can advance in relation to the novel. Especially the fourth stance requires that the reader has entered all of the previous stances in order to being able to distance herself from the envisionment. In Langer’ first stance the reader steps into an envisionment and search for meaning, although superficial. The message might be easier to find if the reader has much experience from reading, and thus reads more effectively. The search for meaning assists the entering of the first stance. If the novel is properly presented, and the pupils are given an understanding of what it is about, the book’s message might be easier to find. With that is, however, not meant that the message is revealed already at the beginning. Clues might be given and the search is rather for the clues in order to be able to find out the message after having finished the novel.

Since *Letters From the Inside* is composed by letters, one way to introduce the novel is to let pupils write pen pal-ads of their own, and answer each other, with a following discussion about pros and cons of having a pen pal. Already at the stage of writing an ad, the envisionments take place. The pupils may start reflect on why they
are writing and what this has to do with the novel. It does, in fact, have much to do with the novel, since the pupils’ letters probably differ much from Tracey’s and Mandy’s letters. The aim of the activity is to guide the pupils to reflect on different ways in which letters can be written. They can choose how much of themselves they want to reveal, and they may even lie and pretend to be living in a dream world. The latter suggestion would make discussions during the reading process interesting, as they can compare their letters to the ones in the novel. The more they share the better understanding for each other they may gain, if the letters are true, that is. Also, the level of the written language has to be adapted, since everyone does not know equally much English. They do not know who is going to read the letter, and thus they have to express themselves in a way that everyone can understand, which sometimes can be a struggle.

Another way to introduce the novel would be to evaluate and discuss the front page, including the title. One of Chambers’ general questions is “when you first saw the book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be?” (177). Besides from only evaluating the cover of the novel, this question could be reformulated to, for example, “what kind of book do you think this is?” And, added to the first question, “what in this context does “inside” mean?” On the cover of the edition that is intended in this project, a girl is sitting with her arms crossed over the chest, and in front of her is something that looks like bars. The girl looks rather tough and pupils may figure out that she is in prison, but they do not know why. Irrespective of what presentation of the novel is chosen, it should be done without revealing too much of the novel. Neither does everyone need to agree during the introducing discussions, but they need to accept the different views. Langer describes the envisionment-building classroom as one where “everyone tries to understand others, to be understood by others, and to think things through for themselves” (91), which is a large part of personal growth. The understanding of other people may support the
personal growth of oneself, as well as of others, since it gives them a sense of being accepted. Already at the beginning of the novel, an example of accepting the other can be found. Mandy makes it clear that she will not write about the usual stuff like favourite group or favourite food (Marsden 1). Tracey accepts it and answers by writing about her everyday life. Since their correspondence is fairly unusual it might be seen as a development. They try new ways and acquire new experiences through each other, which, could be argued, means that they support each other’s personal growth.

At the beginning of a novel, the reader is confronted with new ideas and need to use previous knowledge about the theme. “We try to gather enough ideas to gain a sense of what the work will be about” (Langer 17). She compares it to a meeting with a person for the first time. Though the girls in the novel do not meet physically, they interact through letters and, a few times, through phone calls. When encountering new acquaintances, people try to collect ideas about the new friend in order to understand them. Hence, it might as well be positive to read novels that are new for the reader, since, then it challenges the reader, and may support her personal growth. All pupils are not at the same stage in their development and some pupils may have more ideas than others. Letting the readers discuss already at the beginning would be a positive idea, in order to share experiences and develop their envisionments together. Some might need more support than others during their envisionment-building. Although the envisionment-building is an individual process it can benefit from being shared among others. In the second stance, for example, the envisionments are open for change (18), and thus may be influenced by others. Since all readers gain different interpretations, the own interpretation may develop with the help of others. One may not understand Tracey the same way as someone else does. That must not necessary be wrong but rather depend on the readers’ different backgrounds, which is an important factor to have in mind when it comes to teaching literature aimed at personal growth. Although
the understandings of characters differ, the sharing of interpretations may widen pupils’ visions. By listening to other interpretations in a booktalk, the understanding of the novel may be clear, and the reading might become more efficient, which, in the foregoing sections, has been pointed out is supportive for personal growth.

The third stance is all about the reader, her experiences and feelings. Rosenblatt supports the use of literature in relation to personal growth by stating that “literary texts provide us with a widely broadened “other” through which to define ourselves and our world” (145). Through the envisionments readers reflect on their feelings, which they need to be aware of in order to grow and develop, and literature may help people become more attentive on their feelings as well as recognising others’ feelings. Seeing the text as one other (person) and live through the story may increase empathy. It provides another understanding of the surroundings, at the same time as pupils practice their reading skills. The more practiced reading skills the more effective becomes the reading. In this case, it may be easier to see the text as one other, as Rosenblatt expresses it, since letters usually are written by someone known or someone to befriend, much like Tracey and Mandy. The girls have each other and share almost everything, which makes it easier for them to see the text, in their case the letters, as another person. Since the third stance focuses much on the reader’s feelings, it could be argued that one aim is to “encourage greater sensitivity” (Carter and Long 3). With a wider ability for sensitivity, it may be easier to tolerate and accept people, instead of only understanding them. Sometimes people cannot understand everyone and thus, simply accepting people as they are will have to be enough. One example of this is when Tracey finally admits that she is in prison (Marsden 56). Although it shocks Mandy, she continues sending letters. She writes “I’m curious about you”, by which it can be understood that Mandy accepts the fact that Tracey is in prison. Perhaps Mandy relates to her violent brother, but it is not acknowledged if he ever has been in prison. Although her brother’s history
is unknown, it could be argued that the letter (the text) makes Mandy reflect on her brother. In the third stance the envisionments are used to reflect when the novel (the text) reminds the reader of something. Depending on what experience the novel reminds her of, she may need to go through the process of overcomming it again, or perhaps enjoy the happiness the occasion brought on the first time. No matter which of the possibilities, it may help talking about it. For example, in the novel, Tracey does not want to reveal her real situation at first, but Mandy questions her letters and tries to establish a confident relationship, which eventually makes Tracey open up to her, and, although not at first, their friendship benefits from her confession.

Immediately after Tracey has confessed, the friendship is in danger. But as well as in Langer’s fourth stance, where the reader distances herself from the text in order to objectify and analyse, the girls continue with their corresponding and sort out their problems. Working together to solve a problem extends the ability to cooperate, and in order to manage in life people have to accept that sometimes they need other people’s help. In the novel, it can be read between the lines that Tracey becomes a better person with Mandy’s support, and although it is not clearly revealed what happens with Mandy in the end, it can be understood that Tracey has become a loving person that cares for other people as she writes “the worst thing would be if anything bad happened to you” and “the most important thing right now is that you’re OK” (Marsden 144). In the two quotes, Tracey’s progress becomes clear. She has acquired much experience and changed her way of thinking, thus possesses knowledge that she can use in different situations, that is, the fifth stance. Tracey’s personal growth might mirror the pupils’ development during the reading. The aim with studying *Letters From the Inside* in this case is to support pupils in their personal growth, which may be done by giving them a chance to see a possibility of change. At the beginning, Tracey was in the cells intended for the worst criminals. At the end, though, she is being transferred to another block in
the penitentiary, which is contemplated the ones that are not as dreadful. Hopefully, the way Tracey behaves at the end attracts the pupils more than she does at the beginning. Although Langer states that the fifth stance does not occur as frequently as the other ones, it might not be as unusual as her statement may be intended. On one hand, it might not be very usual that pupils at this stage already have experienced a total change in life, though exceptions exist. On the other hand, trying new areas assists people in their personal growth. Nikolajeva states that adolescence is “a dynamic and turbulent phase of human life” (141), which can be interpreted as the time when people experience total changes. Those changes are important to discuss thoroughly, which simply can be done through literature, and thus Chambers’ model for booktalks will now come in handy.

In this project, Chambers’ booktalk is intended to be used after the reading of the novel has been finished. Through the booktalk, Langer’s fourth and fifth stances could be approached, which requires the reader to having thought about and reflected upon their reading. The reading experience may be evaluated through discussions, with the assistance of chosen questions that Chambers provides through the Tell me-approach. Once again, while using this approach, the question “why” must not be asked. Everyone all can relate to being met with the question “why”, and presumably most of the people have answered it with a sigh, and “visible loss of enthusiasm” (Chambers 136). In this case, the question whether the pupils liked or disliked the novel will not be treated as a separate question. It is a matter that usually comes naturally during discussions of other topics, and, there is a great risk of accidentally asking why the pupils found the novel good or bad. The question “why” is, as mentioned, banned from this approach. It could, however, be argued that answering a question that is not very inspiring may be a progress in the pupils’ personal growth. It might be an overcoming of an obstacle. However, in school pupils should be encouraged to always do their best, and thus it is
important that teachers find new and interesting ways to work with their pupils. In order for the pupils to enter the way of thinking that is required for this type of booktalk, some groundwork needs to be done. The pupils should prepare their thoughts and be able to argue for them. The more equipped they are, the more self-confident during the talks they will appear, and sometimes they might need to take on a bit of false confidence, which eventually is converted to true confidence, since they persist their actions.

Discussions during the reading should be recurring, which means that the pupils should already be prepared to some extent. The characters’ personality and manners may have been portrayed in previously made analyses, and thus they can be compared to what the pupils knew at those points of time versus what they know after having finished the novel. The girls’ development may be discussed, and the pupils can compare their lives to the characters’ lives. Thereby, the booktalk starts with some of the special questions. For example, the question “which character interested you the most?” (Chambers 180), would be appropriate to ask in this discussion. Certainly, everyone does not agree on one character. They are all different and appreciate various things, hence the discussion continues to be about the pupils and their thoughts. On the other hand, there are not many characters in the novel that the reader learns to know much about, thus limiting the chance to identify with someone. If the case would be that someone cannot find anything with which to identify, since they are in a period of identity formation, as Nikolajeva states (141), discussions that open up for new interpretations would be necessary. Not only do they develop together but they also learn to know each other better by discussing characters and identification. With this, it could be added to Simpsons’ suggestion, about the teacher and the learner promoting each other’s growth (65), that the learners too support each other. They are in the same situation, adolescence, and school should work against the risks of development in a
negative direction. Reading about a girl at their own age who has been imprisoned, might force them to give their choices during this period a closer consideration.

In the fifth stance the envisionments are considerably developed and the pupils can use their advanced knowledge to discover unfamiliar subjects. Since the pupils at this stage are just entering the age of discretion, no one could possibly have been in prison as a convict. There might be pupils who have been visitors, though. Most likely, the pupils have knowledge about prisons, for example, what it is and how to end up in one. However, penitentiaries, and especially the kind of isolation in which Tracey is put, should preferably be extraneous to pupils. Although previous experiences are important, it is in this case an advantage if the pupils do not have experiences from prisons. This would mean that the pupils have to use the knowledge they acquired from the novel, which serves their advanced knowledge, while discussing the situation, which would be the unfamiliar subject.

When pupils feel that they have finished their discussions about the characters, the talk most likely becomes inactive. They consider the discussion to be finished, and, if no one has anything more they want to contribute to the talk, it is time to move forward. This could be done in two ways. One alternative is that the talk may continue by elaborating on one idea that has come up during the discussion about the characters, which could be anything that the pupils find interesting. This means that during the talk, the teacher must be an active listener in order to be able to assist the pupils in their talk. The other alternative would be that the teacher decides on a question that could be a logic continuum, for example, the narration. For this novel it is a logic progression, since the girls write to each other, and thus narrate the story. Depending on how well the pupils have understood the novel or how much of their envisionments they have shared, the discussion might automatically continue from talking about characters to talking about the narration, as they make new connections. If they do not advance by
themselves, Chambers’ question “who was narrating the story?” (180) would be relevant for continuation. In addition to the mentioned examination would be the matching questions if the story is told in the first person or in the third person and if the reader gets to know anything about what the characters were thinking and feeling (180-81).

The narration in *Letters From the Inside* is not one of the usual with one omniscient narrator. Probably the pupils realise that the story is being told through the girls’ correspondence, and thus, the reader understands the novel from the protagonists’ perception of the world. This matter might be a short and concise discussion depending on how fascinating the pupils find narration. Then again, discussions about the way a novel is written may increase the understanding of how other novels are composed. If pupils earlier in their lives have read mostly books with one narrator, they might find *Letter From the Inside* interesting, since they see new ways of writing, and thus expand their understanding of books in general. One reason, not to like reading in general, might be that the pupils do not accept the concept of one all-knowing narrator. Therefore, novels that do not follow the mentioned concept are advantageous to use in the teaching of languages. It supports pupils’ personal growth in the way that it might increase the interest for reading. The more people read, the more effectively their reading becomes, and with it, the development as a person is promoted.

Among the Tell me-questions about the narration, Chambers has added the discussion of relations between the characters, which also could be applied to the pupils and their different relations. According to Carter & Long, personal growth includes relationships and tolerating other people (3), which is an aim that is supported by the discussion about characters and their relationships. In some places in the novel, the reader learns about the girls’ feelings for their friends and possible boyfriends, and occasionally Mandy sends letters that contains a greeting from one of Mandy’s friends
to Tracey, who answers and greets back as well. Befriending a friend’s friend might, in practice, not be as easy, and thus, the pupils can use the different friendships in the novel and relate to their feelings and reflect on their different relationships. At this stage, the readers might be in the fourth stance, since they reflect on what they have read and their thoughts about it. The reading experience is related to the real world and the pupils’ lives. Some might understand what is simply written and not reflect further on it, thus making the talk rather focused on facts. However, since this project focuses on personal growth, simply accepting what is known is not enough. The knowledge has to be shared and expanded.

3.1 Discussion

Previously it was briefly mentioned that Langer’s stances may actually follow on each other, in opposition to what she states. In the analysis it can be seen that the reader progresses through the stances as the reading proceeds, which of course is not necessarily the rule for all books. If the assigned novel is unknown for the reader, the envisionment have to start develop before she can use it in any of the following stances. However, if a pupil has read the novel before, she might already have an envisionment, which can further developed. Personal growth is a continuous process, and happens of course also every time people read and interpret. Reading a novel for the second time might be a good way to practice and developing one’s reading skills, and thus learn to read more efficiently. It may result in new connections, which the reader needs to process. The interpretation might not be exactly the same as last time they read the novel, which means that the envisionment changes. Of course, reading is an individual process and no one can say, in which stance the reader finds herself. Pupils may give the impression of being in, for example, the third stance, when they are actually in
another one. The fourth and fifth stances, however, requires that the envisionment-building has been thoroughly developed.

On the other hand, it could of course be that the stances do not follow on each other. The third stance, which includes that the novel reminds us of something, may happen anytime, perhaps even in the beginning of the reading. In *Letters From the Inside*, the reader is first introduced to Mandy through a letter, which may remind pupils of when they introduce themselves in different contexts, and how they do it. Nowadays, it is not very usual with pen pals, seeing that the internet has expanded since the novel was written in 1991. Children and young adults use platforms on the internet, for example facebook, to communicate, but still, they need to present themselves, which can be done in different ways. One of the suggestions on how to present the novel, was to write pen pal ads. In addition to the writing exercise, a discussion about pros and cons with having a pen pal, and how much of oneself one should be revealed would be preferable, since it is even more important to reflect upon how much and, above all, what is being shared on the internet.

Talking is a social activity. People talk every day for various reasons and in different contexts. Above all, they adapt their speeches to the situation. Chambers’ model for booktalks aims, as he describes it, at helping children talk well and improve their articulation (97). One aim with the teaching of English is for the pupils to learn to express themselves in different ways. Explanations might be necessary to reformulate or expanded, and thus the use of different ways to communicate what they want to say is important. By encouraging pupils to tell more about something, rather than asking them why, supports their personal growth in the way that their self-confidence raises, since they feel that their sayings matter.
4 Conclusion

Further studies on this matter may be to prepare a teaching plan on this subject to carry out in a real class and try to figure out the pupils’ development. Although personal growth itself is not really measurable, attitude changes, or attempts for it, may be found. It could show if pupils are more likely to open up than they were before the plan was carried out, but above all, it could show if the class becomes more stable than before, that is, they appreciate each other more, and see the benefits of being different which is one aim with teaching for personal growth. Also, the reading skills could be measured. If the pupils learn to read more efficiently, they certainly may want to read more since they overcome difficulties and thus their self-confidence increase. This project would not be measurable though in terms of personal growth. It would be a matter of recognition from the teacher. Usually, a teacher follows the same class from year 7 to 9, and hence gets to know the pupils well. In year 9, the teacher then would have great knowledge about the relations and the grouping in the class. By implementing a plan like the one described above, the pupils might not be as divided as they were before, if they were.

Although the notion of personal growth is fairly wide, it simply can be summarised as the personal development. In this thesis, the focus has been on the individual growth as well as the understanding of others in order to manage preserving relationships, and literature has been the main subject of teaching. It shows that literature can be a great tool for teaching aimed at supporting personal growth and development, especially during adolescence when people start changing the most. School has a great responsibility to direct the pupils’ individual developments in a positive direction, and make sure that pupils do not make any decisions they will regret.
for the rest of their lives. Teachers serve an important role as models for pupils, and should always encourage pupils to do their best.

Conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that, since personal growth is a constant process, the frequent conversations are important. Pupils must be able to feel that they are in a safe place and the classroom environment have to be accepting and including, since the topic of conversation is private and may be sensitive, but also since all pupils are not very fond of opening up to other people. As well as the selection of books to use in a class, methods are to be adjusted to the pupils, rather than being followed to the letter. Sometimes, pupils may take part in the determination of which book to read, but careful consideration is necessary. The novel should fulfil aims in the syllabus as well as be relevant for the pupils, since teachers do not want to experience a mismatching. It has, however, also been discussed that reading novels which are usually not of the kind the reader usually likes is a progress in the personal growth, since the reader widens her understanding for other people and how they may feel and react to different occurrences.
Works Cited


Appendix

A. TELL ME, Children, Reading And Talk - Aidan Chambers

The questions have been copied from Chambers’ book Tell Me, Children, Reading and Talk. When using the Tell Me-approach, this list is entirely intended for the teacher and must not be shown to the students.

THE BASIC QUESTIONS

• Was there anything you liked about this book?

• What especially caught your attention?

• What would you have liked more of?

• Was there anything you disliked about this book?

• Were there parts that bored you?

• Did you skip parts? Which ones?

• If you gave up, where did you stop and what stopped you?

• Was there anything that puzzled you?

• Was there anything you thought strange?

• Was there anything that you’d never found in a book before?

• Was there anything that took you completely by surprise?

• Did you notice any apparent inconsistencies?

• Were there any patterns—any connections—that you noticed?
THE GENERAL QUESTIONS

• When you first saw this book, even before you read it, what kind of book did you think it was going to be?
• What made you think this?
• Now you’ve read it, is it as you expected?

• Have you read other books like it?
• How is this one the same?
• How is it different?

• Have you read this book before? [If so:] Was it different this time?
• Did you notice anything this time you didn’t notice the first time?
• Did you enjoy it more or less?
• Because of what happened to you when reading it again, would you recommend other people to read it more than once, or isn’t it worth it?

• While you were reading, or now when you think about it, were there words or phrases or other things to do with the language that you liked? Or didn’t like?
• You know how, when people speak, they often use some words or phrases or talk in away that you recognise as theirs: are some words or phrases used like that in this book?
• Have you noticed anything special about the way language is used in this book?

• If the writer asked you what could be improved in the book, how would you have made it better?
• [Alternatively] If you had written this book, how would you have made it better?
• Has anything that happens in the book ever happened to you?

• In what ways was it the same or different for you?

• Which parts in the book seem to you to be most true to life?

• Did the book make you think differently about your own similar experience?

• When you were reading, did you "see" the story happening in your imagination?

• Which details — which passages — helped you "see" it best?

• Which passages stay in your mind most vividly?

• How many different stories [kinds of story] can you find in this story? Was this a book you read quickly, or slowly? In one go, or in separate sessions?

• Would you like to read it again?

• What will you tell your friends about this book?

• What won’t you tell them because it might spoil the book for them? Or might mislead them about what it is like?

• Do you know people who you think would especially like it?

• What would you suggest I tell other people about it that will help them decide whether they want to read it or not? Older than you? Younger?

• How should I give it to them? For example, should I read it aloud or tell them about it and let them read it for themselves?

• Is it a good thing to talk about it after we’ve all read it?

• We’ve listened to each other’s thoughts and heard all sorts of things that each of us has noticed. Are you surprised by anything?
• Has anyone said anything that has changed your mind in any way about this book? Or helped you understand it better?

• Tell me about the things people said that struck you the most.

• When you think about the book now, after all we’ve said, what is the most important thing about it for you?

• Does anyone know anything about the writer? Or about how the story came to be written? Or where? Or when? Would you like to find out?

THE SPECIAL QUESTIONS

• How long did it take the story to happen?

• Did we find out about the story in the order in which the events happened?

• When you talk about things that happen to you, do you always tell your story in the order in which they happened? Or are there sometimes reasons why you don’t? What are the reasons?

• Are there parts of the story that took a long time to happen but were told about quickly or in a few words? And are there parts that happened very quickly but took a lot of space to tell about?

• Were there parts that took the same time to tell as they would have taken to happen?

• Where did the story happen?

• Did it matter where it was set? Could it just as well been set anywhere? Or could it have been better set somewhere else?

• Did you think about the place as you were reading?
• Are there passages in the book that are especially about the place that the story is set?
  What did you like, or dislike, about them?
• Was the setting interesting in itself? Would you like to know more about it?

• Which character interested you the most?
• Is that character the most important in the story? Or is it really about someone else?
• Which character(s) didn’t you like?
• Did any of the characters remind you of people you know?
• Or remind you of characters in other books?

• Was there anyone not mentioned in the story but without whom it couldn’t have happened?
• Can you think of any reason why s/he doesn’t appear or isn’t mentioned?
• Would the story have been the same if s/he had appeared or been mentioned?

• Who was telling – narrating – the story? Do we know? And how do we know?
• Is the story told in the first person (and if so, who is this person)? Or the third person? By someone we know about in the story or by someone we know or don’t know about outside the story?
• What does the person telling the story – the narrator – think or feel about the characters? Does s/he like or dislike them? How do you know?
• Does the narrator approve or disapprove of the things that happen and that the characters do? Do you approve or disapprove of them?

• Think of yourself as a spectator. With whose eyes did you see the story? Did you only see what one character in the story saw, or did you see things sometimes as
one character saw them, and sometimes as another and so on?

• Were you as it were, inside the head of one of the characters, only knowing what s/he knew, or did the story take you inside a number of characters?

• Did we ever get to know what the characters were thinking about? Were we ever told what they were feeling? Or was the story told all the time from outside the characters, watching what they did and hearing what they said, but never knowing what they were thinking and feeling?

• When you were reading the story, did you feel it was happening now? Or did you feel it was happening in the past and being remembered? Can you tell me anything in the writing that made you feel like that?

• Did you feel as if everything was happening to you, as if you were an observer, watching what was happening but not part of the action?

• If you were an observer, where were you watching from? Did you seem to watch from different places, sometimes, perhaps from besides the characters, sometimes from above them as if you were in a helicopter? Can you tell me places in the book where you felt like that?