

Section 4: Literature and reading

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TEACHING LITERATURE: HOW? TOWARDS NEW PARADIGMS IN THE DIDACTICS OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The aim of the research, which is at the beginning, is to identify the well-grounded paradigms of the didactics of literature by understanding: a) the psychological features of adolescents studying literature and the neuro-cognitive functions involved in learning it; b) the pedagogical foundations in motivating young learners and in providing them with coping strategies, which enable them, from a psychological point of view, to face everyday challenges successfully by exploiting literature; c) the most suitable teaching methods in order to create reading-oriented students not only able to enjoy and interpret literary texts but also eager to choose new ones and to discover their hidden meanings autonomously.

The topic of the paper is closely related to the aim of the conference because it deals with the analysis of the objectives and methods of teaching literature in secondary schools, a *parte subiecti* (the student) and a *parte obiecti* (the subject). The study is based on the attempt to define literary competence and its connection not only with the theory of literature, but also with some perspectives which have recently been proposed by cognitive and neuro-cognitive sciences.

The paper tries to demonstrate that the hermeneutic approach to literary texts is the most useful not only as far as philology is concerned,

but also in order to improve the efficacy of teaching literature. It is possible to maintain that this approach can be supported by the scientific evidences of cognitive neurosciences and try to prove that it can be better applied by adopting the teaching method usually defined as “collaborative and cooperative learning”.

1. Hermeneutics and the reader

According to Gadamer’s thesis, the only way to establish a vital relationship with the works of the past consists in considering them connected to the present, by means of a mediation between *what was* and *what is*. When Gadamer writes that aesthetics has to turn to hermeneutics, he wants to highlight how the fruition of a work of art involves the more general problem of interpretation, by emphasising the meaning of the past for the present time. The philosopher argues that he/she who interprets can approach what is interpreted only through a series of pre-comprehensions and pre-judgments. The interpreter’s mind is not a *tabula rasa*: it is occupied by a whole series of expectations or patterns of meaning, in other words by some temporary guidelines, which are preliminary hypotheses for decoding what has to be interpreted. So what has to be comprehended is already partially comprehended: this is the hermeneutic circle. According to Gadamer, the hermeneutic activity involves a sort of tension between familiarity and extraneousness. The latter, stressed by the temporal distance, is due to the otherness of the interpreted object, whereas the former is due to the fact that both he/she who interprets and what is interpreted belong to the same historical process thanks to which there is a connection between them. The temporal distance between them is not an empty abyss, but a space filled with tradition.

The reader shares the tradition which he/she lives in. The authority of literary texts comes before the reader but it survives only if the reader establishes a fruitful dialogue with the past when trying to interpret texts. This process is defined by Gadamer as “fusion of horizons”. The reader interprets and understands a text which seems to be extraneous and by doing so he/she partakes in the creation of a deeper and broader meaning, thereby better understanding not only the text but also him/herself. The fusion of horizons, which is connected to a productive approach to texts, is not linked to the theoretical knowledge of the subject; it means getting

in touch with the text not by means of method or theory, but by following paths, that is, the experience of interpretation and the example of others. This practical knowledge, which sounds like the Aristotelian *phronesis*, is based on what may be called thorough sensitivity and it is carried out by following others' appreciations and interpretations.

Gadamer's vision of the hermeneutic circle can be defined as close interaction between text and reader which co-determinates both of them. The meaning of a text is not established once and for all but it is moulded and exists thanks to the interplay of past and present. In this sense the texts of the past can never be mastered. In the same way complete self-knowledge can never be reached. Both knowledge of the past and tradition and knowledge of ourselves are never-ending processes. The hermeneutic activity takes the form of a dialogue between present and past. Gadamer, following Plato, thinks that the essence of knowing consists in asking. He sees the core of the hermeneutic experience in dialogue, the dialectic process of question and answer. The text, which originates from an answer to a question, interrogates us and we, either personally or in a community environment, interrogate it and ourselves after being urged by new questions. It is an infinite process, in which every answer emerges as a new question (Gadamer 1989, Moda 2000).

2. Hermeneutics and didactics

Teaching literature within the school system can be really successful if the class is changed into a "hermeneutic community" (Luperini 2002). For this reason new methodologies, which also imply the exploitation of conflicting interpretations, are needed. Different approaches to texts in the field of literary criticism, that is the author-oriented approach linked to idealistic philosophy, the text-based approach linked to structural formalism, do not seem to be exhaustive.

On the other hand, hermeneutics, with its stress on the reader's interpretation of the text and on the interaction with it and its past and present interpreters, seems to be more satisfactory and useful. The exercise of interpretation, in other words of constant interrogation and investigation with no revealed but relative truth, can be considered as a quest, which is important in itself and which lies at the basis of democracy in a society, in which dialogue plays a major role.

It is clear that teaching literature should start from objective historical and philological factors, i.e. paraphrases, rhyme scheme and musical devices, figures of speech etc. This first “technical” step, commentary, is based on the analysis of the text and follows widely-known procedures, but another step, interpretation, is needed. When interpretation is involved, i.e. when themes, interdisciplinary and cultural issues etc. are examined, the focus is on the classroom or the hermeneutic community as these issues are connected to the readers of the text, not to the text itself (Luperini 2002).

Is it possible to obtain confirmation of this interpretation of literary texts from a psychological point of view? Does it work in a classroom? The question seems to be very important if the objective is to found the didactics of literature in terms of a pedagogical approach not only in terms of philosophy and philology. In order to verify the usefulness and the efficacy of this way of teaching, it is necessary to find out if there are neuropsychological correlates of the hermeneutic interpretation of the literary message.

3. Between hermeneutics and neurosciences

In the field of neurosciences, the measure of the bloodflow and of the metabolical glucose level can be visualised by means of three methods: 1) Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, 2) Position Emission Tomography and 3) Single Photon Emission Computer Tomography. These neuroimaging techniques show that the brain system is divided into two parts. If we consider the generally accepted idea of the multifactorial vision of the relationship between the organ and the function, each cerebral hemisphere operates in all cognitive processes, but the grade of its involvement depends on the novelty – routinisation distinction.

In studying the reaction of the organism to new experiences, in particular the reaction of the frontal lobes, Goldberg stresses the importance of laterality. His studies show that the area of cognitive control shifts from the right hemisphere to the left hemisphere, and from the frontal to the posterior parts of the cortex when new information is assimilated. Different parts of the prefrontal cortex work when the decision-making process starts. Western civilisation rewards a true

response (“veridical decision making”) but does not focus on individualised (“actor-centred”) flexible decision making (Goldberg 2002, 2005). The transfer of the cognitive control from the right hemisphere to the left one occurs according to different time scales: on a scale which lasts for minutes and hours, when brief learning is involved, or on a scale lasting for years, when complex skills and codes are learned, as in the case of language. It is possible to say that the entire human civilisation was characterised by such transfer of the cognitive emphasis from the right hemisphere to the left one, which produced the accumulation of different moulds ready for use. Those patterns are accumulated from the outside thanks to various cultural contributions and during the learning process they are internalised by individuals, as sorts of previously fabricated cognitive structures. Every attempt to transfer Vygotskij’s historical-cultural psychology into neuroanatomical terms inevitably leads to this conclusion. It is clear that this physiological evidence seems to stress the unavoidable connection between the historical reality of the subject, who is the result of the dialectical relationship between his/her own self and the outcome of tradition, as we saw in Gadamer’s *Truth and method*. As said above, the hermeneutic activity involves a sort of tension between familiarity and extraneousness, a concept close to that proposed by Goldberg about the working of the mind.

On the other hand, not only have neuroscience researchers have ignored the actor-centred adaptive decision-making process, but educators often neglect it, too. Some, probably too numerous, parts of our educational system are based on teaching decision making in deterministic situations, which admit only one true solution. Actor-centred adaptive decision-making strategies are not often taught. On the contrary, this task is carried out by literature during the hermeneutic process of the interpretation of the text. Such strategies are acquired in a peculiar way by every individual, as a personal cognitive discovery through attempts, errors and omissions: however it should be very important that psychologists and educators take up the indispensable challenge of expressly teaching actor-centred principles of problem solving (Goldberg 2002, 2005).

4. Didactics of literature: the hermeneutic approach in the light of the neurosciences

This physiological evidence seems to prove the clear relation between the historical reality of he/she who interprets, the subject, who is the result of the dialectical connection based on a series of precomprehensions and pre-judgments, and what is interpreted, as Gadamer claimed. Are there other opportunities to prove the connection between neurosciences and a hermeneutic approach?

Recent research suggests that “the brain ceaselessly performs many functions simultaneously” (Caine & Caine 1990: 66). A rich environment and a variety of stimuli make learning easier. Thus the teacher of literature should make use of varied strategies, i.e. “individual learning times, group interactions, artistic variations and musical interpretations”¹. So teaching literature has to be based not only on the hermeneutic interactions between students and texts within the community of interpreters, the class, but also on a rich multimedia contextualisation of the literary messages. Hypertexts seem to be an interesting didactic proposal.

Neuro-cognitive research highlights that “the search for meaning is innate” (Caine & Caine 1990: 67; Caine, R. N., Caine, G., McClintic & Klimek 2004: 67) and that “the mind’s natural curiosity”² is aroused by complex challenges. As a consequence, lessons and activities should excite the mind’s search for meaning. The challenge is to propose the interpretation of texts through an exegesis based on discovering the roots of literary knowledge. A constant interaction between teacher and students in the learning community allows students to build literary knowledge and the competencies provided for in the curriculum.

Neuroscientific studies have shown that the brain perceives and generates patterns. This means that teachers should contextualise information so as to let learners identify patterns and link them with previous experiences. It is not sufficient to pursue competent reading based on the analysis of texts. After the structural analysis of the *signifié* and of the *signifiant* it is necessary to actualize and update a literary message by connecting it with the students’ experience. The net of literary knowledge has to be woven on a didactic plan based on a series of

¹ www.sedl.org/scimath/compass/v03n02/1.html (accessed 22.3.2007).

² www.sedl.org/scimath/compass/v03n02/1.html (accessed 22.3.2007).

modules linked to the ideas of diachrony and synchrony: as Gadamer teaches, the work of interpretation is based on both contemporary and previous interpretations.

Recent research in the neurosciences points out that emotions and cognition cannot be split, as emotions can be fundamental to the recollection of stored information. Thus teachers should be aware of the importance of the emotional climate in the classroom and try to create a positive environment because it can help students learn in the most favourable conditions. In this sense, the literary competencies that students try to achieve should not be restricted to comprehension, analysis, interpretation and contextualization, but should also include emotional competence. The latter is created by the teacher and the students themselves, by experiencing a constant analysis of the self, by examining their own emotions and feelings when they face the texts and by comparing their inner life with that which is proposed in literary works. How is this possible without a class environment based on a multifaceted dialogue characterised by the dialectic conflict of interpretations, which forces students to show their own inner life?

As the brain “perceives and creates” (Caine & Caine 1990: 67), that is “processes parts and wholes simultaneously” (Caine, R. N., Caine, G., McClintic & Klimek 2004: 119), teachers should not isolate information from its context, because this makes learning more difficult. So teachers have to plan activities requiring full brain interaction and communication. If a teacher proposes the hermeneutic activity like a sort of immersion in the entire phenomenon of literary communication, he/she takes into consideration not only the text, but also the author, the public, the context, the code and the means of literary communication, i.e. a culture and its diachronic and synchronic links with other cultural environments, that is to say, different historical interpretations.

Recent neuroscientific research suggests that “learning involves both focused attention and peripheral perception” (Caine & Caine 1990: 67; Caine, R. N., Caine, G., McClintic & Klimek 2004: 199). Teachers should try to exploit this finding by placing materials (posters, works of art, noticeboards) “outside the learner’s immediate focus” so as to influence their learning. Moreover teachers have “to be aware that” their “enthusiasm, modeling, and coaching”³ are fundamental to communicate the value of what they are teaching. Besides it is necessary to go beyond class-centered learning. In the case of literary studies libraries, archives,

³ www.sedl.org/scimath/compass/v03n02/1.html (accessed 22.3.2007).

museums and meetings with writers can be useful instruments for contextualising the process of interpreting texts in an environment that can be suitable for improving knowledge. And these environments can reinforce the entire work of interpretation.

As learning processes are both conscious and unconscious, teachers should foster individual connections or patterns of meaning by means of motivational techniques, and help students check what they have learnt through conscious reflection on it (metacognitive process). Literature teaches students to recognise the feelings of the characters. At the same time, it makes the reader feel emotions that he/she will learn to recognize by juxtaposing them to his/her previous experiences and readings. In this way a student becomes a better reader, but also a person who is more aware of his/her inner life. This result can be stimulated in the “hermeneutic community”, which enriches these psychological experiences.

Neurosciences stress the importance of natural spatial memory when the brain works. Its process of understanding occurs in the best possible way if there is an embedding of facts and skills in this kind of memory. At the same time, it is interesting to note the role of traditions and of prejudices in Hans Georg Gadamer, who seems to have foreseen this issue. As a consequence, creating or miming experiences and using different senses would be useful. Projects, presentations, metaphors, and integrated contents coming from different disciplines might play an important role as they link the subject to real experience. Moreover the contextualisation of learning not only in the classroom, but also in informal (the widespread culture of multimedia) and non-formal (clubs, cultural associations, etc.) environments of education is supposed to be very appropriate.

Neuropsychological research highlights that learning is favoured “by challenge and inhibited by threat” (Caine & Caine 1990: 69) associated with helplessness (Caine, R. N., Caine, G., McClintic & Klimek 2004: 29). Thus the classroom environment and atmosphere should be both alert and relaxed, highly demanding but at the same time not repressive. In this sense methodologies have to be characterised by a continuous attention to the meaningful and personalised ways of teaching, which are based on the co-operative and collaborative learning of the hermeneutic community.

Research in the neurosciences underlines that “each brain is unique” (Caine & Caine 1990: 69) and “uniquely organised” (Caine, R. N., Caine, G., McClintic & Klimek 2004: 225). Moreover the brain’s structure is

changed by learning. Therefore teachers should exploit diversified strategies to attract students' personal interests. On the other hand, students should be free to "express" their "visual, tactile, emotional or auditory preferences". In this sense, co-operative and collaborative learning has to transform the class into a hermeneutic community of practice, i.e. a group of students who share an interest and a passion for reading literary texts and learn to do it better as they interact regularly. In this community it is easier to give someone the possibility of expressing him/herself, because group activities encourage students to behave more spontaneously and in accordance with personal attitudes and different types of intelligence, according to Gardner's and Sternberg's theories.

5. Cooperative learning and communities of practice

What has been underlined in the above considerations reveals that in a classroom based on a community-oriented and hermeneutic methodological choice there is an evident connection between the recent acquisitions of the neurosciences and the emotional atmosphere, the environment and the techniques of teaching literature. So collaborative and co-operative learning seems to represent a methodological approach which is closer to the purpose of creating a hermeneutic community. Why? Because it is probably the most suitable approach to make different interpretations emerge.

When students work in a group and pool ideas to produce a project, discuss a lecture, analyse a short story, etc., they exploit a method of teaching and learning called collaborative learning. Co-operative learning is a specific kind of collaborative learning. In co-operative learning students work together in small groups on a structured activity. It is important to stress that co-operative learning is characterised by the fact that students are individually accountable for their work but the work of the group is also evaluated.

The good points of learning in small groups are: a) students learn to work as a team and develop their weaker and interpersonal skills; b) students share positive qualities but also overcome their weaknesses; c) students learn to face conflicting views and reflect on them: in our case they learn to deal with the conflict of literary interpretations; d) if the objectives are clear, students improve their knowledge and understanding

of the subjects and topics under investigation (Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec 1998; Johnson & Johnson 1991). The main advantages are the following: A) Emphasis on diversity. Students deal with different people, different interpretations, different views linked to different cultures. The result will be a better understanding of other cultures and anthropological backgrounds. This is an essential element in order to lay the foundations of the hermeneutic process. B) Recognition of individual differences. Students face different perspectives and responses – in our case the variety of readers’ responses – to the issues under discussion, so the result of their efforts will be more comprehensive and complete. C) Promotion of the aptitude for socialising. The exchange of the interpretations, in our case related to literary texts, and the exchange of points of view leads students to interact with fellow students. This interaction may particularly help students who have difficult social relations. It also reinforces, as has been said above, the connection between hermeneutics and democracy. D) Promoting learning through the active involvement of students. Each student is more active when working in a small group and more involved in the issues under investigation and discussion: he/she learns to think critically as he/she shares the process of interpretation of the text together with fellow students. E) Increasing the possibilities of receiving personal feedback. Exchange and personal feedback is enhanced and increased in small groups whereas in large groups only few students express their ideas and points of view. Thus the learners can consolidate their skill at interpreting literary texts through debate and can become mature readers. These five points seem to correspond to the above-mentioned considerations dealing with the implications that originate from hermeneutics and neurosciences.

At the same time it is worth analysing the notion of community of practice, which makes it possible to integrate the didactic concept of the hermeneutic community. “Communities of practice” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). are groups of people who share an interest or a passion for something they do, and learn to do it better through regular interaction. The basic points are: a) “the domain” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002: 19-20). A community of practice is not synonymous with a network of connections among people. It is characterised by a “shared domain of interests”. Its members are committed to the domain and share competence, which distinguishes them from other people. In our case this domain is represented by literary texts and studies. b) “The community” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder

2002: 28-29). The interest in their domain encourages members to work together, discuss, share information and build relationships that help them learn from other members. The conflict and discussion of interpretations which the hermeneutic community is based on seem to correspond to this definition. c) “The practice” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002: 37-40). As a community of practice is not a mere community of interest, its members may be defined as “practitioners”. They share practice, i.e. experiences, tools, common approaches to problems. Constant interaction, intense effort and practice are required to the same extent as they are necessary to create in the classroom the hermeneutic community.

Conclusions

The correspondence between these issues and the hermeneutic community of the class guided by the didactic method of co-operative learning is clear. This class can basically be considered a community of practice because it has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest, literature, shared literary tools reinforced by co-operative learning, shared texts. The skills of the members of this class are reinforced because the environment, from a psychological and methodological point of view, corresponds to the finds of the neurosciences. The procedures students have learned to apply will help them give interpretations which will be both personal and close to the text, and make them really good readers.

If the Project on Languages of Education aims at producing a European framework dealing with the formation of the identity and the development of values, it has to take into consideration good teaching practices as far as the didactics of literature is concerned. This corresponds to the basic demand for planning a language curriculum in connection with the concept of literary competence. The latter consists in showing how the language can be used not only in ordinary contexts, but also in a complex and enriching way linked to historical and anthropological traditions.

Consequently, this competence is clearly related to the language curriculum, as the ability to develop discourse about literature has to be assessed. In this sense the first step of this study was to try to understand why and how the aforementioned teaching practices are brain-based,

and therefore both psychologically and pedagogically useful in effectively implementing the processes of learning literature in the context of a language classroom.

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DESCRIBING THE DUTCH LITERATURE CURRICULUM: A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH

Introduction

In the last forty years, from 1965 until 2005, the position of literature education in Dutch secondary schools has changed dramatically. At the same time, there are continuities that might indicate particular Dutch preferences. We simply list some of the continuities and major changes as we perceived them.

Continuities

- 1) *No connection.* The language and literature curriculum are unconnected, although they are taught by one and the same teacher. The separation is indicated by separate textbooks and separate schedules¹. Several attempts have been made to connect the two curricula, for example via integrative students' text books, but to no avail. The two curricula remain largely independent from each other.
- 2) *No canon.* In the literature curriculum, the focus is on reading and interpreting literary texts. The selection of readings is not bound

¹ In fact, the language curriculum itself is a conglomerate of sub curricula. Four sub domains of key aims are formulated (in this order): reading, writing, oral skills and argumentative skills. Until recently, these skills were taught with incidental connections. Now textbook producers try to make connections along various paths, i.e. via language functions.

by an explicit canon. Teachers are free to choose the reading material, and they set the parameters for free choice by students. Teachers/school departments may provide lists for students, but these lists are not restrictive; they are meant to help students to choose. From contacts with researchers from other countries, we learnt that texts chosen by the teacher to read in class or recommended to individual students, is considered to be ‘dangerous’ (see Ten Brinke, 1976). Confronting students with ‘dangerous’, shocking, radical texts is not common practice, but it happens frequently, and is legitimate.

Changes

- 1) *Aims*. Conceptions changed about how learners should interact with literary texts, what role literary texts play in society, and what learners need to know to become good, independent readers of literature. These conceptions changed over time, related to changes in the academic literary studies. Remarkably, the different conceptions have resulted in an additive curriculum, where various conceptions are included, but mostly...unconnected. We moved from a focus on ‘Work, author and literary history’ in 1950-60, to ‘Work as immanent text’ (1970s) to ‘Work as reflection of society’ (late 1970s) to ‘Work as constructed by the reader’ (1980s). Nowadays, the four parameters of a literary work (author, reader, text and context) are all represented in the list of national key aims.
- 2) *Texts*. The range of texts has been broadened. In the lower secondary grades, more emphasis is on the promotion of reading fiction, and therefore on youth literature or adolescent fiction. In upper secondary education, the focus is more than in earlier days on contemporary literature; fewer historical texts are read and/or discussed in class. It is now admissible to read for the list literary works that are translated into Dutch, although the official documents require ‘works originally written in Dutch’. At some schools, departments of Dutch promote, sometimes in co-operation with the department in modern languages, European Literature. At the same time, the number of texts to be read has been reduced over time. Around 1970, students in pre-academic education were required to read 20 or more texts independently (novels, collections of short short stories or poems, etc.); now, the number is reduced to 12 (minimum, including 3 works from before 1880, a landmark period in the Dutch literary history).

A last phenomenon to include in this panoramic view, is teacher education. Before 1988, Dutch teacher education for upper secondary education consisted of six years academic study, including an optional three months teacher preparation, with some practical work in the classroom, guided by a secondary school teacher. In these six years of academic training, the basics were all kinds of linguistics and literature, with an increasing study load on Speech & Communication, or Argumentation & Rhetoric's. Nowadays, the academic study (Master) consists of four years, and for teachers, an additional year, focused on practical training and pedagogy. As a result of new tracking systems in Academia there are young teachers of Dutch, who have had one or two courses in linguistics, and one or two in literature.

In the debate about the position of literature as a school subject in the Netherlands, different goals of literature teaching can be discerned. These goals may be summarized under four headings: 'cultural literacy', 'aesthetic awareness', 'social awareness' and 'personal development'.

Advocates of the first objective consider the promotion of *cultural literacy* as the main goal of literature teaching. According to this view, students should foremost be acquainted with Dutch literary history and the national cultural heritage, represented by a range of important authors and their works ('the classics').

Advocates of the second objective, *aesthetic awareness*, stress the importance of text studies. Knowledge and skills in analyzing and interpreting literary texts are crucial, because they are seen as prerequisites for making well-founded judgments about the aesthetical value of a literary work: "Students cannot make judgments, when they do not know how to analyze a literary text", according to one of the teachers we interviewed in our study.

Those who adhere to the *social awareness* objective take a different scope that goes beyond the literary text itself. Literary texts reflect and comment upon contemporary or historical society. A literary text cannot be understood without some knowledge of the social context in which it has been written. Therefore, students must get insight into important social issues (e.g., feminism, racism, multicultural issues), and they must learn to approach literary texts critically.

Finally, advocates of *personal development* as the main aim of literature teaching tend to focus on individual student-readers and their personal responses and experiences. Reading and discussing literature are primarily seen as a means to further the personal, emotional growth of the individual student. In particular, students should develop their

own literary taste. A precondition is that students experience pleasure in reading.

It has often been said that beliefs about literature teaching have changed considerably over the past few decades (Van de Ven 1996; Van Schooten 2005; Verboord 2005). The development is usually described as a transition from a teacher-centered, ‘cultural heritage’ approach to more student-centered, socialcritical or reader-oriented approaches. Since the 1980s, reader response theories have gained ground, culminating in approaches that are less directed towards teaching the literary canon and more towards stimulating students’ personal growth as readers. The transition is not uniquely Dutch or even European, but appears to be an international trend in (the thinking about) literary education (e.g., Applebee, Burroughs & Stevens 2000; Poyas 2004).

However, this development has not been as straightforward as often suggested. First, literary history and the literary canon have not disappeared altogether to be replaced by more student-centered approaches. On the contrary, in discussions about the position of literature as a school subject, ‘cultural literacy’ still plays a prominent role, and the discussion about the canon seems revived.² In recent proposals for Dutch literature exams three domains for evaluation are proposed; literary development (e.g., being able to report personal reading experiences), literary theory (being able to use literary-theoretical terms for analysing and interpreting literary texts), and literary history (being able to present an overview of Dutch literary history) (SLO 2006). In this proposal, we recognize the “additive curriculum”, in which three different conceptions of literature teaching are placed next to each other. Literary history and text analysis have not been superseded by reader-oriented approaches to literature teaching; instead, reader-oriented approaches have simply been added to the curriculum.

Secondly, the supposed transition from cultural literacy to reader-oriented approaches pertains to the ‘perceived’ curriculum; that is, to the conceptions, beliefs and belief systems in the (re)thinking of literature teaching. Changes in the perceived curriculum not necessarily imply changes in the ‘actual’ curriculum, that is; what teachers actually do in the classroom. Several case studies have shown that Dutch teachers do not always act in accordance to their own general aims (De Moor & Thijssen 1988; Van der Leeuw & Bonset 1990). For instance, reform-minded teachers may adhere to student-centered aims, but in practice

² In 2005, a committee was installed by the Dutch government in order to consult teachers and schools on what could be considered “the canon” for Dutch culture, history and literature.

use teaching methods that are incompatible with these aims, such as; lecturing most of the time, asking ‘factual’ questions instead of eliciting personal responses, focusing on knowledge reproduction instead of knowledge transformation. In other words, there appears to be a tension between general goals and teaching practice. General goals may mask great diversity at the level of classroom practice.

In the debate, little attention has been given to the level of classroom practice as yet. Empirical studies of literature practices in Dutch secondary schools are scarce. Therefore, we decided to conduct an empirical study among teachers of Dutch language and literature in the final grades of secondary education (Janssen & Rijlaarsdam 1996; Janssen 1998). The main aim of the study was to clarify the relationship between teachers’ general aims on the one hand, and the form and contents of their literature teaching on the other hand. Our main research question was: Do different aims go together with different forms of literature teaching? In order to be able to answer this question, we needed to develop a descriptive framework that might capture variations in the literature curriculum.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

A survey was held among 1165 teachers of Dutch language and literature of about 300 secondary schools. The sample encompassed 60% of the total population of teachers of Dutch in the final grades of two types of secondary education: higher general secondary education (havo) or pre-academic education (vwo). The teachers were sent a questionnaire, asking about their general goals and about the contents and form of their literature teaching.

The response rate was acceptable; 51% of the teachers returned the questionnaire (593 teachers of 279 schools). A nonresponse-study showed that the non-responding teachers did not differ significantly from the responding group with respect to various background and teaching variables. We may therefore assume that the respondents are fairly representative of all teachers of Dutch language and literature.

1.2. Descriptive framework

In order to develop a questionnaire, we devised a framework for describing possible variations within the literature curriculum. The backbone was formed by the four main goals of literature teaching; ‘cultural literacy’, ‘aesthetic awareness’, ‘social awareness’ and ‘personal development’. These goals were briefly explained as follows;

- Cultural literacy:* to acquaint students with the cultural heritage, with valuable products of Dutch literary culture;
- Aesthetic awareness:* to give insight into (the structure or composition of) literary texts;
- Social awareness:* to give insight into social reality and to learn to approach this reality critically;
- Personal development:* to help students to get to know themselves better and to attain emotional growth.

Next, we drew up a list of variables or dimensions on which we expected variations between teachers adhering to different general aims. The dimensions pertained to the contents as well as to the form or methods of literature teaching. We also added personal background variables of the teachers themselves (e.g., age, gender, experience) to the framework. In scheme 1, the descriptive framework is presented.

Variables	Main goal of literature teaching			
	Cultural literacy	Aesthetic awareness	Social awareness	Personal development
CONTENT Subject matter Literary history Literary theory Literary texts Age of texts Genre of texts Literary canon Ordering Text approach				
METHOD Learning activities Use of textbook(s) Evaluation Method of evaluation Criteria of evaluation				
PERSONAL Age Gender Experience Knowledgeable-ness				

Table 1. Framework for describing differences between literature curricula

1.3. Questionnaire

Each variable in the framework was incicated by one or more questions in the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, we first presented the four general aims, asking the teachers to rank order these four aims from most relevant to least relevant to their own daily practice. Next, some 60 questions followed with regards to the content and method of literature teaching (subject matter, literary texts, learning activities, use of textbooks, et cetera). Finally, questions about the personal background of the teacher were asked.

Most questions were in a multiple choice format (e.g., using a five-point scale; 1 = no attention at all, to 5 = very much attention). Other

questions could be answered by giving an estimate (e.g., of the percentage of time spend on a particular topic).

The questions were retrospective in nature, that is; the teachers were asked to report on their literature teaching during the previous school-year, in one of the final grades of secondary education (grades 10 to 12, student ages between 15 and 19). In the Appendix some examples of questions are given.

1.4. Analysis

In our analysis, the reported features of the curriculum were the independent variables, and the main aim of the teacher was the dependent variable.

As a first step in the analysis, the responding teachers were divided into four groups, depending on their main aim of teaching literature; supporters of ‘cultural literacy’, ‘aesthetic awareness’, ‘social awareness’ and ‘personal development’. Being a supporter meant that the teacher considered the particular aim the most relevant to his/her own practice. Figure 1 shows the division of all teachers over the four general aims.

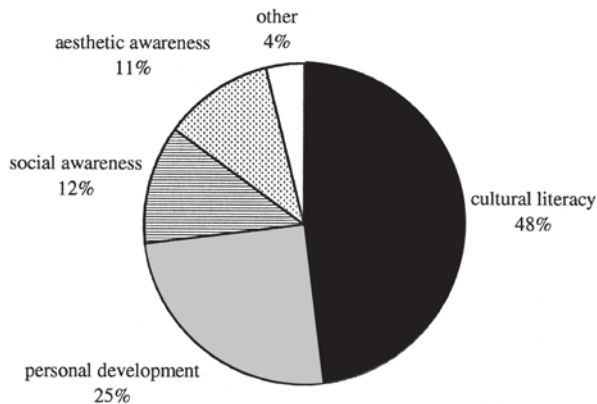


Figure 1. Distribution of aims of literature teaching, in percentages of teachers prioritizing

About half of the teachers (48%) reported that contributing to students' cultural literacy was the main aim of their literature teaching. About 25 per cent of the teachers said that they primarily intended to stimulate students' personal development as readers. Promoting the aesthetic or social awareness of students were less popular goals; 11 and 12% respectively reported to primarily support these goals in their literature lessons.

Very few teachers (4%) could not be labelled as supporters of one of the four aims, for instance because they failed to respond to the question or because they found multiple goals equally important. In the further analysis this group has been left out of consideration.

As a second step in the analysis, we examined whether the four groups of teachers differed in self reported characteristics of their literature curriculum. To evaluate the differences between the groups, various statistical tests were used. Pearson chi-squares were used for all variables that were measured on a nominal level; analyses of variances for all variables measured on at least interval level. The significance level was set at .05. To decide *which* of the groups significantly differed when tested via analyses of variance, we used the Scheffé-method for post-hoc comparisons.

Finally, we calculated the effect-size (ES; Cohen 1988). Effect-size was used as a means to evaluate the practical meaning of the differences between groups. An effect-size of at least .80 standard deviation is considered to be a large effect; effect-sizes between .50 and .80 are considered to be medium effects, whereas an effect-size equal to or below .50 is considered to be a small effect (Cohen 1988).

2. Results

In this section we present the main differences we found between the literature programs of the four groups of teachers; supporters of 'cultural literacy', 'aesthetic awareness', 'social awareness' and 'personal development'.

Group differences are indicated with a plus sign (+) or minus sign (-). A plus sign (+) means that the particular group was found to devote significantly *more* time or attention to the topic or activity than any of the other groups of teachers. A minus sign (-) means that the group

devoted significantly *less* time or attention to the topic or activity than any of the other groups. A blank cell indicates that no significant difference was observed.

2.1. Subject matter

In the questionnaire we asked the teachers how much time they devoted to literary history and theory (in terms of the proportion of time spent on literature as a whole), and how much attention they paid to various historical and theoretical topics. In Table 2, differences in subject matter between the four groups of teachers are presented.

The table shows that supporters of cultural literacy spent significantly more time on literary history than any of the other groups of teachers. Compared to supporters of personal development, cultural literacy teachers also paid significantly more attention to historical literary movements (e.g., romanticism, realism, naturalism). Other forms of art than literature, such as visual arts and music, received significantly less attention from supporters of social awareness, compared to other teachers.

Subject matter	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Literary history	+	-	-	-
Literary movements	+			-
Other arts	+	+	-	+
Student perceptions	-	-	+	+
Literary theory	-	+	-	-
Poetics / stylistics	+			-
Narrative structure	-	+	-	-
Reader response	-	-	+	+

Table 2. Differences in subject matter between the four groups of literature teachers

Students' own perceptions and experiences more often played a role in the literary history lessons of supporters of social awareness and personal development than in the lessons of other teachers. In terms of effect-size, these differences are medium sized (ES.50 –.80).

In the estimated time spent on literary theory, the supporters of aesthetic awareness stand out as a group. On average, these teachers spent significantly more time on literary theory in the literature classroom than any other group. The difference is large ($ES > .80$).

We found clear differences in theoretical ‘stance’ between the various groups of teachers. Cultural literacy teachers tended to focus more on poetics or stylistics; aesthetic awareness teachers more on narrative structure and analysis, whereas supporters of social awareness and personal development tended to focus more on reader-oriented concepts and theories. These differences are small or medium sized.

2.2. Literary texts

Table 3 shows the differences in the selection of readings, that is, the types of literary texts being read and discussed in the classroom.

Text genres	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Poetry	+	-	-	-
Prose	-	+	+	+
Historical texts	+	-		-
Contemporary texts	-	+		+
Literary canon	+			-
Adolescent fiction	-		+	+

Table 3. Differences in the selection of reading

As shown in table 3, supporters of different aims also differed in their selection of readings. Cultural literacy teachers discussed significantly more poetry, more historical texts, and more works belonging to the literary canon than the other groups of teachers. Personal development teachers, on the other hand, tended to discuss more prose, more contemporary literature, and more adolescent fiction in the classroom than other teachers. The differences are medium to small.

In discussing literary texts in the classroom, teachers may focus on various aspects of the texts, such as the literary context, formal aspects

of the text (style, composition) or reader responses. We asked the teachers how much attention they paid to various aspects when discussing narrative texts (Table 4).

Approach focused on	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Literary context	+	-		-
Formal aspects of text	-	+	-	-
Non-literary context	-	-	+	-
Reader responses	-	-	+	+

Table 4. Differences in approaches to narrative texts

Table 4 shows that cultural literary teachers paid more attention to the literary context of a text, aesthetic awareness teachers focused more often on the formal aspects of a text, social awareness teachers paid more attention to the social, nonliterary context, and personal development teachers (together with the social awareness group) more often focused on reader responses to the texts being read in the classroom. These differences are medium to large.

Furthermore, we asked teachers how they generally ordered or grouped the literary texts that were discussed in the classroom (Table 5).

Cultural literacy and social awareness teachers more often used a chronological ordering (e.g., starting in the Middle Ages and working from there to the present day), whereas aesthetic awareness and personal development teachers more often preferred a grouping according to theme (e.g., ‘Love’, ‘War’). These differences are small or medium-sized.

Text order	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Chronological	+	-	+	-
According to theme	-	+	-	+

Table 5. Differences in the ordering or grouping of texts

2.3. Learning activities

We asked the teachers for an estimate of the lesson time spent by students on various learning activities, such as listening to lectures and peer discussion. Differences in student activities between the four groups of teachers are presented in Table 6.

Learning activities	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Listening (to lecture)	+	-	-	-
Whole-class discussion	-	+	-	-
Peer discussion	-	-	+	+

Table 6. Differences in students' learning activities

In the literature lessons of cultural literacy teachers, students spent significantly more time listening to the teachers' lectures, than in the lessons of other teachers. The differences are medium to small. Social awareness and personal development teachers, on the other hand, tended to leave more room for peer discussions than cultural literacy teachers. The differences are small in terms of effect-size.

2.4. Textbooks

In answer to our question which textbook(s) were used in the classroom, over a 100 different titles of textbooks and other materials were mentioned. We did not find any significant differences between the four groups of teachers with regards to particular textbooks that were used. However, aesthetic awareness and personal development teachers more often indicated that they did teach without any textbook. These teachers often preferred to compile their own teaching material, compared to cultural literacy and social awareness teachers. These differences are small.

2.5. Evaluation and testing

We asked the teachers how they evaluated students' achievements in literature; what kinds of tests they used (Table 7).

Methods of evaluation	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Written book report	-	+	-	-
Paper	-	+	-	+
Creative writing	-	+	-	+

Table 7. Differences in methods of evaluation

Many different tests were used to evaluate students' achievements in literature, such as written knowledge tests, literary texts followed by questions, written book reports, and individual oral tests. However, only in the use of writing assignments significant differences were found between the four groups of teachers. Aesthetic awareness and personal development teachers more often used writing assignments as a means to evaluate the results of their literature lessons than other teachers. Aesthetic awareness teachers more often used book reports than any other group. The effect-sizes are small.

In addition, we asked the teachers how important they considered various criteria in evaluating students' achievements in literature (see Table 8).

Criteria of evaluation	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Knowledge of				
Historical movements	+	-	-	-
Poetics / stylistics	+		-	-
Analytical terms	-	+	-	-
Social context			+	-
Skills in				
Literary analysis	-	+	-	-
Formulating response	-		+	+
Evaluating texts	-			+

Table 8. Differences in criteria of evaluation

As shown in Table 8, cultural literacy teachers considered ‘knowledge of literaryhistorical movements’ and ‘knowledge of concepts and terms from poetics and stylistics’ to be more important than other groups of teachers. Aesthetic awareness teachers considered ‘knowledge and skills in structural analysis’ more important than any other group of teachers. These differences are large. Social awareness teachers found ‘knowledge of the social context of literature’ more important than personal development teachers. The latter group focused more on the acquisition of skills, such as ‘the ability to formulate ones own personal response to literature’ and ‘the ability to evaluate literary texts’, than cultural literacy teachers. These differences are small or medium-sized.

2.6. Personal background

Finally, we examined whether the four groups of teachers differed in personal background variables, such as age, gender, years of experience as a teacher and the extent to which they were ‘knowledgeable’ or well-informed about recent trends in (teaching) literature. No significant differences in background variables were found between supporters of different aims of literature teaching.

3. Validity of findings

In addition to the survey, we conducted interviews with three representatives of each of the four groups about their aims, the contents and methods of their literature teaching practices (Janssen 1998). These twelve interviews largely confirmed the differences between the four groups of teachers. Supporters of cultural literacy formed a homogeneous group with regards to the self reported contents and method of their literature teaching. In the classroom these teachers largely followed a ‘knowledge transmission’ model, that is; the teacher transmits his or her knowledge of literary history and ‘the classics’, by lecturing and teaching in front of the class.

Supporters of other aims of literature teaching deviated from this traditional model in several ways; by putting emphasis on the literary

text itself and on ways in which students may analyse texts (aesthetic awareness), by emphasizing the socialpolitical backgrounds in discussing literature (social awareness), or by focusing on subjective and affective aspects of the literary reading process (personal development). These teachers also used other teaching methods than lecturing in the literature classroom, such as individual independent seat-work, collaborative work and peer discussions.

From observing literature lessons of four representative teachers (one for each group), we learned that teachers strongly differed in the task demands they posed for students (Janssen 1996). The cultural literacy teacher, for instance, asked significantly more questions that required students to reproduce knowledge, compared to the other teachers who set more productive, interpretative tasks. The personal development teacher asked significantly more evaluative questions of students compared to the other teachers (Table 9). These findings are in line with the results of our survey.

Task demands	Main goal			
	Cultural	Aesthetic	Social	Personal
Reproductive tasks	+	-	-	-
Productive tasks				
Convergent	+		+	-
Divergent	-	-	+	+
Interpretative	-	+	+	+
Evaluative	-	-	-	+

Table 9. Differences in task demands between four teachers

5. Discussion

This paper reports a study to describe the variation in the literature curriculum in The Netherlands on several dimensions. It shows that this variation in text choice, theoretical focus, teaching format, student tasks co-varies with the aim teachers support most. The dimensions in the descriptive framework, in other words, are sensitive to reveal relevant distinctive features of practice.

For the Dutch situation, four ‘profiles’ emerged from the empirical data:

Cultural literacy

Teachers within this profile spend more time on teaching literary history than other teachers. Their selection of readings reflects an emphasis on poetry and on historical, canonical texts, which are taught in chronological order. Their teaching methods more often reflect a traditional model of knowledge transmission by lecturing. In evaluating students’ achievements they focus more on the reproduction of knowledge, and less on the demonstration of skills.

Aesthetic awareness

Teachers within this profile spend more time on teaching literary theory, especially narrative theory, than other teachers. Compared to cultural literacy teachers, they more often prefer to discuss contemporary prose, in stead of poetry, and to group literary texts according to theme, in stead of chronologically. Compared to cultural literacy and social awareness teachers, they provide more writing assignments to students, such as writing book reports. In testing, they focus more often on students’ knowledge and skills in structural analysis, than other teachers.

Social awareness

Supporters of social awareness more often use reader-oriented approaches, adolescent fiction, peer discussion, and productive-divergent tasks than cultural literacy or aesthetic awareness teachers. In discussions of literary texts in the classroom, they tend to emphasize the non-literary, social backgrounds of texts more than other teachers. ‘Knowledge of the social context of literature’ plays a larger role in evaluating students’ achievements within this profile.

Personal development

Supporters of personal development and social awareness share an emphasis on reader response and student-centered approaches to literature instruction. However, personal development teachers are less interested in non-literary, socio-political issues surrounding literature. Also, they are more outspoken in their preference to discuss contemporary, non-canonical literature in the classroom. Compared to other teachers, supporters of personal development attach more importance to students’ ability to evaluate and express their judgments about literary texts.

Remarkably, we found no differences in the choice of textbooks between profiles. Apparently, textbooks do not accurately reflect the literature curriculum.

Nor did we find differences in the teachers' personal characteristics, such as age, experience and 'informed-ness'. The often expressed assumption that reform-minded teachers are, for example, younger and less experienced than other teachers, was not confirmed.

We have not been able to capture the Dutch literature curriculum in all its complexity (if this is possible at all). Our framework is almost certainly susceptible to improvements, by refining or adding dimensions. However, the framework in its present form satisfied the requirement of bringing differences in approaches to literature instruction to light. Some of the observed differences were quite large in terms of Cohen's effect-size. The observed variations are meaningful, on the whole resulting in consistent patterns.

Literature curricula are often defined in terms of 'content' or academic domain (e.g., literary theory, 'new criticism', 'reader response'), or in terms of parameters for the selection of readings (e.g., literary canon). Our framework includes these content dimensions, but also instructional dimensions and learner activities. These dimensions proved to be relevant to detect distinctive features. We think that this set of descriptive dimensions could be useful as a start for describing literature curricula in other European regions; such a study might reveal to what extent variation within regions, such as the four profiles in the Netherlands, are historical-culturally bound. Is the curriculum of the 'personal development' teacher in the Netherlands the same as in other regions? To what extent are features of the Dutch profile typical Dutch interpretations of world wide theoretical movements, such as the reader response movement? To what extent are profiles (or coherent choices) in the literature curriculum national or European?

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APPENDIX

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Aims

What were your main aims in teaching literature during the previous school-year? Please, answer this question by rank ordering the goal statements below, according to their relevance for your literature lessons.

Content

What proportion of the available time for literature did you spend on teaching literary theory (e.g., poetics, stylistics, narrative structure, genre theory) during the previous schoolyear?

Please, answer the question by giving an estimate (in a percentage of the time).

In discussing narrative prose (stories, novels, fragments), how much attention did you generally pay to the following topics?

(0 = no narrative prose was discussed; 1 = no attention at all; 2 = little attention, 3 = neutral, 4 = much attention; 5 = very much attention)

- The contents of the text, or the author's intentions.
- Formal aspects of the text or genre (e.g., style, language, composition).
- Literary context (e.g., author, literary movement, critical reception).
- Non-literary context of the text (e.g., socio-political backgrounds).
- Students' experiences in relation to the text.

How were most of the literary texts discussed in the classroom ordered?

- 1 Most of the texts were ordered chronologically, according to movement and/or author.
- 2 Most of the texts were ordered according to theme.
- 3 Most of the texts were ordered in some other way, namely.....
- 4 Most of the texts were not ordered or grouped in any specific way.

Method

How often did the following student activities occur in your literature lessons?

(1 = never, 3 = incidentally, 5 = regularly)

- answering teachers questions
- peer discussion about a literary text
- independent, individual work
- collaborative work in pairs or small groups

Did you use one or more textbooks for literature during the previous school-year?

1 yes

2 no (you may skip the following questions)

Which textbook(s) did you use?

Please, state the title(s) as fully as possible.

Which of the following methods of evaluation or testing did you use in your literature curriculum during the previous school-year? (yes/no)

- oral test or individual conversation about the students' reading list
- oral presentation by the student about a literary topic
- written test about subject matter (e.g., literary history)
- literary text(s) followed by questions
- paper
- bookreport
- reading portfolio
- creative writing assignment
- other method(s), namely

Personal background

How long have you worked as a teacher of Dutch language and literature in general or pre-university secondary education? (number of years).

Which of the following journals on literature or literature teaching do you read (regularly, incidentally, never)?

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PROMOTING READING LITERACY IN MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION: HOW TEACHING GERMAN AT GERMAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS CAN HELP RAISE THE LEVEL OF READING PROFICIENCY OF 14- TO 16-YEAR OLDS

Introduction

Over the past few years, international studies of reading literacy such as IGLU and PISA have drawn our attention to the promises – and problems – of students’ assessment. With regard to mother-tongue education in Germany, the results have been quite striking. At the end of primary school, German students have shown a good reading performance. However at the end of secondary school, their reading competence shows considerable deterioration. 15-year olds are not proficient readers, which is likely to limit them in their opportunities at institutions of higher learning and in their future life. They need profound enrichment in reading instructions. Reading literacy is an important issue in education and individual development especially in our modern knowledge based society which demands lifelong learning. Reading literacy consists of an ever expanding set of knowledge, skills and strategies of comprehension in an era of increasing globalisation. The OECD (2002:15) recognizes the central role of reading skills:

The ability to read and understand instructions and text is a basic requirement of success in all school subjects. The importance of literary skills does not, however, come to an end when children leave

school. Such skills are key to all areas of education and beyond, facilitating participation in the wider context of lifelong learning and contributing to individuals' social integration and personal development.

The results of PISA 2000 and 2003 suggest that changing and improving students' reading proficiency and its motivation are major goals of reading education. In addition to this, German school education is especially challenged to solve the problem of students of disadvantaged e.g. of migrant backgrounds. DESI, another recent study, has produced similar findings.

Finally, we want to emphasise two further goals of research in this article:

1. Explanation for the dramatic decline in reading competence

First, we need to look deeper into the reasons for the dramatic decline in reading competence that appears to be taking place at secondary school level. From the international large-scale studies mentioned above, we derive that almost one in every four students at the age of 15 does not reach the level of the 'basic user', which includes the understanding of simple words and sentences. They have difficulty in grasping the meaning of complex texts, and often fail to understand or reproduce in their own words the meaning or content of texts. They try to avoid these difficulties, read less and thus reduce their reading capacities more and more. They often find reading material too difficult or boring and they develop biased attitudes towards reading. Better readers tend to read more because of their higher motivation, which leads to an improvement of their vocabulary and skills. The gap between good and poor readers – especially among boys – thus grows continuously. On the whole, the findings of all research state a strong correlation between achievement, success and positive attitudes towards reading.

In general, girls and boys show different profiles of reading. Girls tend to read more than boys. They do not only spend more time reading, they also read other types of texts than boys. The most striking result of PISA in 2000 was that of all the participating countries German boys read least.

2. Promotion of reading competence

Secondly, we need to promote reading competence better through specific interventions. In order to do this, more focus should be put on the **reading process**. We should identify the major factors that determine the reading performance of students. Above all, we need to know which reading strategies are pertinent to which **dimension** or **phase** of the reading process and how students can acquire and train these strategies. Strategic readers construct the meaning of texts actively, try to interact with it, set purposes for reading and look for methods to accomplish these aims. With the help of a monitoring activity, they consider their comprehension during the reading process. Before and after reading, a proficient reader constructs, examines and extends meaning. Therefore, there are two important tasks for research:

- to construct and examine empirically a framework of reading skills and metacognitive strategies correlated with the different phases of the reading process;
- to find effective ways of teaching the knowledge and practice of these reading strategies. There is evidence that cognitive strategy instruction is only efficient when it goes along with motivational support as well as interesting texts. Struggling learners need both motivational and cognitive support, a balance of direct and guided instruction as well as independent learning which encourages the student to a more personal application of these strategies. With the help of these learning activities, students will more easily make new authentic and motivating literacy experiences. This is important in order to build up self-confidence and to explore a variety of genres and media.

A new reading curriculum for secondary-school education based on interdisciplinary research may lead students to broaden their knowledge of different texts, expand their literary experiences and improve their literary skills.

1. Explanation for the dramatic decline in reading competence

All further studies after IGLU, PISA and DESI should follow the concepts and frameworks of reading literacy used in these studies, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). The table below presents a short summary of the CEFR with regard to reading competence:

Levels		Types of text	Reading tasks	Proficiency markers
Proficient User	C2	Manuals; Literary works		Reflecting on the form of texts
	C1	Specialised articles; longer technical instructions	E.g. Appreciate distinctions of style	
Independent User	B2	Articles and reports on contemporary problems; contemporary literary prose	E.g. Characterise particular attitudes or viewpoints	Advanced situational model
	B1	Descriptions of events, feelings and desires in personal letters		Simple situational model
Basic User	A2	Advertisements; prospectuses; menus and time tables; simple, personal letters	E. g. find specific, predictable information	Basic understanding
	A1	Notices, posters, catalogues		

The main criterion of distinguishing these levels of reading literacy is ‘types of texts’, ranging from words and sentences in advertisements to complex texts such as longer technical instructions, and also from well-known, everyday texts to specialised texts. On closer inspection, this criterion of ‘types of texts’ at various points needs further differentiation.

There are three points to raise in this context:

1. continuous and non-continuous texts (level A2) actually seem to imply different levels of proficiency, because non-continuous texts require the interpretation of tables, diagrams, images and their interrelation to legends, other texts, and so on.

Likewise,

2. literary and factual texts represent different levels of proficiency too, since literary texts refer to the real world in an indirect way, which has to be figured out by the students first.

And finally,

3. the difference between the ‘proficient user’ and the ‘independent user’ is *only* given as one of increasing quantity and complexity of the texts involved, and *not* in terms of specific aspects of reading performance. The highest level of reading performance – ‘constructing an advanced situational model’ – is already reached at the ‘independent user’ level. Thus, levels C 1 and C 2 – the ‘proficient user’ levels – are not adequately elaborated.

2. Promotion of reading competence

The gradation of ‘levels of proficiency’ offered by the CEFR reflects only insufficiently the specific internal gradation of the reading tasks involved. What is needed in complementing existing preoccupations with ‘types of texts’ therefore, is a focus not so much on how students deal with ‘form’, but with ‘content’. Such a focus would involve a different model of text information processing, and would take into account *all* the various tasks of the reading process including approaching a text, figuring out its meaning, reproducing or summarising it in one’s own words, reflecting on it and taking a stand. However, what criterion would be suitable to complement ‘types of text’, or would be suitable to replace it altogether?

Following Jenkins (1979), reading, or text comprehension, is determined by:

- the reader (prior knowledge, etc.);
- features of the text (readability, etc.);
- activities of the reader (reading strategies);
- difficulties of the reading task.

Which of these four components, again, could serve to define aspects of reading and thus ‘levels of proficiency’ reached by students better? When it comes to the reading *process*, **reading strategies** are paramount. The reading process is guided by various reading tasks pointing to several internal **phases of the reading process**, e.g. before, while, and after reading. These phases correspond to reading tasks such as anticipating, processing, paraphrasing or reflecting and taking a stand.

For each phase of the reading process one can define various ‘levels of proficiency’, similar to those established by the CEFR. It was one of our main objectives to put them to practice for our reading test which had already been filled out by 22 students in 9th grade at a German grammar school. What the following framework shows is an application of the conceptualisations here presented. The complexity of the test design is slightly reduced for the purpose of this article. The following three levels are to be distinguished:

Level	Dimension	Task - Strategy	Task format	Credit - Score
L3	Reflecting on the text (content and form); taking a stand	Paraphrasing, reproducing the text in one’s own words; to draw on knowledge and experience; examine and evaluate content, language and textual elements	Free text production	Triple
L2	Developing an interpretation	Close reading of the whole text; analyse and integrate ones own ideas and information	Simple and complex multiple-choice-items and free text production	Double
L1	Broad understanding; retrieving information	Close reading of words and sentences; focus and retrieve (explicitly stated) information	Simple and complex multiple-choice-items	Simple

This framework of reference is based on a theoretical conception of the reading process. The test questions were designed to measure these major processes of reading comprehension described in the framework and they are based on distinctive reading tasks and strategies. Moreover the framework can be directly tested empirically, since it allows attaching it to adequate task formats such as ‘multiple choice’, ‘free text production’, or a mixture of both.

For some concrete examples and test results, we can have a look at a ‘test run’ of this draft test. In accordance with frameworks such as the CEFR, both, familiar, everyday ‘material’ or texts, literary and factual, and unfamiliar ‘material’, also factual and literary texts have been chosen for the test. We made sure that both categories of texts dealt with **key issues** of our society and the ‘student’s world’ in particular. This was to avoid the potential confusion typical of many reading tests in the past, where students had to grapple with thematically ‘alien’ texts.

For the first category of familiar, everyday texts (factual and literary) we chose texts concerning the lifestyle of teenagers and peer groups. For the second category of unfamiliar texts the subject was development policy. Thus, the texts to be used for the test design were as follows:

Familiar, everyday topic	factual text: lifestyle of teenagers	Text 01
	literary text: lifestyle of teenagers	Text 02
Unfamiliar topic	factual text: development policy	Text 03
	literary text: development policy	Text 04

The example we now want to present is factual text 03 concerning development policy. This text formed part of a test run of this design along with the first texts with the familiar everyday topic. It was put to a group of 22 14- to 16-year olds at a Bochum secondary school in March 2006 and was evaluated by just one rater.

Text 03: Development policy

About 1.2 billion people, a fifth of mankind, live in extreme poverty. They have to get by with less than 1 US dollar a day. Poverty is one of the greatest problems of the present.

The aim of development policy is to fight poverty by helping countries to help themselves. Not only the consequences, but more importantly, the causes of poverty need to be removed. To this end, development policy takes an overall approach to changing the national structures of poor countries, socially, economically, and politically.

At an international level, fair trade and fair commercial relations are pivotal, as well as debt relief. At a national level, structural reforms in favour of the poor need to be implemented.

Since employment is often the only way to escape from poverty, development policy needs to pay particular attention to raising the employment rate. However, poverty not only concerns the unemployed or under-employed. Many people in poor or developing countries can hardly earn a living despite being full-time employed.

The following reading task refers to ‘level of proficiency’ L 2 and is presented in order to give an idea of the different reading tasks the students have to handle. The function of the questions was to measure the major processes of reading comprehension described in our framework. In order to answer correctly, the students have to connect two correlating ideas and to infer the missing information. To achieve this, the students have to closer read the whole text and draw on their knowledge. Multiple choice facilitates the task insofar as the students do not have to answer in their own words. The reader does not have to go beyond a literal interpretation and is not required to evaluate or take a stand.

L 2	Developing an interpretation	MC	Closer reading of the whole text, figuring out its meaning
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Task: *What does the text argue? Please tick the two correct sentences.*

1. It is the aim of development policy that people in poor or developing countries are able to help themselves and can do without external support.	Correct	Not correct
2. Poverty in the developing countries has to be relieved by larger amounts of money.	Correct	Not correct
3. Development policy requires that rich countries dispose of cash reserves which means that in the first place it has to attend to the rich countries instead of the poor.	Correct	Not correct
4. Development policy contributes to reducing poverty in the developing countries.	Correct	Not correct

As for the results of this test group, we have to face an empirical finding which is contrary to our intuition and to our theoretical thinking: the unfamiliar, factual text proved to be much more difficult than the

literary text. Only four out of 22 candidates achieved better scores in this text than their fellow students. The other 18 candidates' proficiency went down considerably with the tasks of this text.

First hypotheses to explain these findings are suggesting the following factors to be relevant:

- the unfamiliar and more or less abstract topic;
- the complexity of the text and its technical terminology (in comparison to the literary text with the familiar topic and the familiar vocabulary).

This result leads us on the one hand back to the analysis of the readability of the text, but nevertheless on the other hand this analysis should combine with the proposal of reading strategies suitable to enhance the reading literacy of the students. On that basis, further steps to promote reading competence ought to be undertaken.

The **promotion of reading literacy** will be put to work by a **pre-post-design**. First, an initial reading test will be given to the main group of students. It is meant to give evidence about reading deficiencies (relating to readability, prior knowledge or reading strategies), which will then have to be tackled by special training, mainly by acquiring and applying certain reading strategies. As a second step, training on these reading strategies takes place in the main and not in the control group. The students in the main group learn, for example, how to control their reading process by monitoring their comprehension silently or aloud as they read, thus creating a mental picture of the action or the setting of a story and retelling a plot in a summary. Before they read the students have to set up an aim and a plan for reading; they have to draw on their background knowledge as to the theme of the text and to chose methods of reading suited to their individual purposes and abilities. Students also have to learn how to evaluate their reading comprehension, to summarise or paraphrase the main ideas and to distinguish them from irrelevant or redundant information. After reading it is important to examine the text and its argumentation, to be able to integrate prior knowledge and new insights.

Conclusion

The above readings tasks – although they are only a small selection of existing lists of reading strategies – again show the complexity not only of the tasks and skills within the different phases of the reading process, but also of the challenge for reading education. A second reading test is meant to measure the improvement of the reading literacy of the main group in comparison to the control group. Positive results after these tests should lead to further testing on a larger national scale. It should encourage teachers to have an open eye for their pupils' reading capacity and their ability to draw upon their prior knowledge. Therefore, the teaching of side knowledge is very important in educational training.

Reading literacy is a basic issue in all school subjects. Although reading is not an aim in itself in all subjects, each learning process relies on reading. So teachers of all school subjects should keep at least half an eye on it.

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