VERBAL INTERACTION
& LITERARY UNDERSTANDING

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INTRODUCTION

Verbal interaction (or 'talk') is one of the most important means by which children are inducted into a culture. It is essential within early socialisation in reading and remains a central feature of successful reading careers. Students apparently learn to think more deeply, critically and independently about issues, by participating in dialogues or discussions. Also, they might well appreciate exchanges about literature with peers, parents and teachers. Studies in reading socialisation show that regular readers often communicate reading experiences with others and value these conversations.

In literature education, verbal interaction may take different forms: peer dialogues, small group conversations, teacher-led classroom discussions, bookclubs, think alouds, etc. The functions of verbal interaction also vary; from exchanging personal responses and/or developing a first understanding of a text to a more thorough interpretation. The amount as well as the forms of verbal interaction on literature seem to differ considerably in the various educational traditions: While a Dutch literature class in upper secondary might demand a lot of writing about literature (portfolio work), within the German "Gymnasium" verbal exchanges on literature are a strong feature. Literary conversations within primary education differ from conversations with older students in secondary education, literary dialogue from developing a basic understanding of a text in class.

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Besides, verbal interaction is an important means for researchers to get insight into student-readers' literary responses during or after reading. Think alouds and interviews are generally accepted methods in reading research that nevertheless pose methodological problems well worth discussion.

Thus, the theme of verbal interaction seemed a promising focus for the Special Interest Group on literary education at the sixth IAIMTE-conference in Exeter 2007. The following contributions all derive from papers that were presented there. They cover a range of issues in connection with the theme and offer insights into different research traditions.

The first paper elaborates upon specifics of literary conversations and in the course of argument develop criteria for their successful 'staging' – a term introduced by Laila Aase during the conference – in class. *Brenton Doecke, Prue Gill, Bella Illesca and Piet-Hein Van de Ven* develop a shared appreciation of a literature classroom that engages students in exploratory talk 'where the very notion of 'literature', as an esteemed body of texts, is open to interrogation' (Doecke et al., 1). An Australian upper secondary classroom of a private girls' school is the setting from which the case is drawn. The authors invite readers not only to follow the specific case study, but also to develop insights into the research design of the International Mothertongue Education Network (IMEN) where teachers as researchers interact with each other and with researchers from different contexts in their analysis of a case, the research design itself being a dialogue of various perspectives.

Next, the study by *Christine Gamba and Anne-Christel Zeiter-Grau* concentrates on literary learning processes of pre-school children in day-care. The authors offer results of an ongoing larger project. Here they analyse the development of picture-based narrative in interaction and stress the development of a zone of common meaning between teacher and children. Here again the focus is on teachers' staging of the dialogue.

The two following papers both contain reports of intervention studies examining different ways of posing questions to a text. *Monica Reichenberg* presents the results of an intervention study with 17-year-old students who attend a health-care-programme. The investigator introduced teachers to a model of structured text talks where students are encouraged to question the author of a text in order to be able to learn from the text. Reichenberg's approach is more general in that both expository and literary texts are addressed via the questioning-the-author-method. Both interaction in class and the quality of elaboration were enhanced by introducing this method. *Tanja Janssen, Marine Braaksma and Michel Couzijn* focus on literary reading. They present results from two different experiments in which they examined the effect of self-questioning on 10th-grade-students' appreciation of short-stories as well as on their interpretations. The authors show that appreciation is strengthened via the development of authentic student questions while the results on students' interpretation are less clear. In discussing their results they also offer an outlook: future research is needed in order to assess the quality of interpretation more precisely. However, the experiments allow for the conclusion that an open approach to literature education which poses authentic student questions first can be beneficial to students' literary reading.

The issue offers an annotated bibliography. It covers empirical studies on discussion-based approaches to literature written in English and hopefully proves valuable for more international research in the field.

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