

“SHE DOESN’T CONSIDER IT TO BE REAL LITERATURE”: STUDENT CONCEPTIONS OF THE TERM ‘LITERATURE’ AND THE NOTION OF LITERARY COMPETENCE

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Abstract

Starting from the premise that there may be a discrepancy between how teachers and students understand the term ‘literature’, this article explores the ability of 10th grade students to define the concept of ‘literature’. It argues that such an undertaking is relevant in light of a similar discrepancy between literary studies and literature: while the first adopts an increasingly inclusive definition of ‘literature’, publications on the concept of literary competence still employ a strongly normative view of literature.

Drawing on empirical observations from a Dutch research project in which students discussed the literary quality of text fragments in jury groups, the article demonstrates that students hold highly heterogeneous ideas about the definition of literature. The analysis of survey responses, transcribed student conversations and jury posters reveals that a minority of students are able to provide a reasoned definition of ‘literature’, while a significant portion equates literary texts with books in general or stories amenable to narratological analysis. Based on these observations, the article suggests expanding the operationalization of literary competence in Alter & Ratheiser’s recent model to include the concept of ‘taxonomic competence’, which encompasses students’ ability to differentiate between literary and non-literary texts through reasoned argumentation.

Keywords: literature education, literary competence, student conceptions of literature, reasoning about literature, comparative reading

1. INTRODUCTION

In April 2021, a Dutch high school student posted a disgruntled message about his literature teacher on the book forum of the social website Reddit. The message stated:

A few days ago, I was interested in seeing if there are any fantasy classics from the Netherlands. So I looked up online, to see if there is some kind of 'Dutch Tolkien.' I couldn't find a lot, so I went and asked my Dutch Literature teacher if there is a fantasy genre in Dutch literature and if she knows of a 'Dutch Tolkien.' She told me bluntly that I shouldn't read fantasy and that she doesn't consider it to be 'real literature.' She basically thinks that Tolkien's books aren't 'real literature.' That teacher is one of the biggest gatekeepers I know. (IkBenBenr, 2021)

With over 20,000 likes and nearly 4,000 comments, the post stirred up serious discussion within the Reddit community, apparently hitting a sensitive nerve. This might not come as a surprise, since the exclusion of fantasy from the realm of literature has even been a topic of discussion within literary studies (e.g. Hunt & Lenz, 2001; Wilkins, 2008; Schneider-Mayerson, 2010). From the perspective of literary didactics, the message is particularly interesting because it highlights that this teacher and her student hold completely different conceptions and expectations of the term 'literature'. This goes beyond the question of whether fantasy is part of 'real literature', whatever that may entail. In this example, the student's expectations play an important role as well: the fact that he approached his teacher for reading recommendations in the field of Dutch fantasy, indicates that he considered that knowledge to be part of the expertise of a literature teacher. From this perspective, her rejection is doubly significant: not only is the student's reading preference dismissed, but also his understanding of what literature actually is.

Starting from the premise that such student perspectives on literariness are related to their understanding of the phenomenon of literature, the aim of this article is to examine the interpretations that students give to the concept of 'literature' in light of the theoretical framework surrounding literary competence. More concretely, departing from a research project conducted in the Netherlands, the article will deal with the question of what 10th grades students consider to be 'literature'.

In what follows, it will first be argued that the broad and inclusive interpretation of the concept of 'literature' in contemporary literary studies is at odds with how the adjective 'literary' is conceived in conceptualizations of literary competence. Subsequently, the focus will be on the results of *The Boundaries of Literature*, a study on the concept of literature among Dutch students in the upper years of secondary school. This analysis will make clear that the study of literary competence might benefit from attention to how students understand the term 'literature', or more specifically, to students' taxonomic competence concerning literature.

2. THE NOTION OF 'LITERATURE' IN LITERATURE DIDACTICS AND LITERARY STUDIES

In her seminal book *Literature as Exploration* (1938), Louise M. Rosenblatt emancipated students in literature classes from passive consumers of knowledge to active meaning-makers who, through their personal responses to literary texts, are co-responsible for the ultimate meaning of those texts. In the 1930s, this was a revolutionary 'emancipation from the heavy hand of the past' (Justman, 2010, p. 126). Retrospectively, however, Rosenblatt had a less emancipatory view on the concept of 'literature', repeatedly criticizing the texts that students enjoyed reading in their free time. Their 'usual literary diet' consisted, for example, not of 'the work of writers of [...] caliber but the stereotyped products of the "pulp" or third-rate magazines' (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 120). The verdict is clear: 'The fact is that, for many students, the only approach to a personal literary experience is provided by "trashy" or "pulp" writings' (Ibid., p. 75).

Given the quotation marks around 'trashy' and 'pulp', Rosenblatt knew that she was dealing with labels rather than clearly defined concepts. Nevertheless, the quotes above underscore how difficult it is to detach the term 'literature' from normative value judgments, even in the field of literary didactics. Just a decade after Rosenblatt, René Wellek and Austin Warren stated that 'By saying that "this is not literature", we express such a value judgment' (Wellek & Warren, 1949, p. 10), emphasizing the strong connection between the definition of literature and aesthetic taste formation. Such an intertwining of literature and taste has, perhaps, been most memorably articulated by Roland Barthes, who, with his ideas about the death of the author also made a significant contribution to the emancipation of readers. According to Barthes, literature can be traced where words have 'savour'—'it is this taste of words that can make knowledge profound, fecund.' (Barthes, 1978, p. 21).

Normativity surrounding the concept of 'literature' is also present within contemporary literary didactics. One recurring tension is between literature as an art form and the texts that adolescent students (voluntarily) read, which are apparently perceived as less artistic. In the widely-used handbook *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* (Beach et al., 2016), prospective teachers are advised to maintain a balance between these two poles: the selection of texts should consider both *appeal* and *literary quality*. The latter is especially relevant for young adult literature, 'particularly if you are interested in using a YAL text as a whole-class selection' (Beach et al., 2016, p. 47). In this view, the question of which literature is addressed in the classroom cannot be detached from normative standards of 'quality'. In practice, this means that literary classics still have a significant influence on text selection in literature education, although the inclusion of contemporary texts, young adult literature, and multicultural literature has seen an increase in recent years (Juzwik et al., 2017, p. 136).

Such a focus on classics and other texts with undisputed literary quality is not without controversy. Literature curricula that do not make room for genres from

popular culture, for example, are criticized for conforming to conventional understandings of what qualifies as 'literature' and what does not (e.g. Huggan, 2020, p. 812). In this sense, there is a tension between literature curricula that adhere to an exclusive, quality-oriented interpretation of the concept of 'literature' on one hand, and contemporary literary studies on the other, where a democratization of the research object has definitively emerged. According to Matthew Stratton, 'The definition of what qualifies as "literature" worthy of academic study, has expanded from poetry and drama to include popular genre fiction, digital media, comics, and texts written by authors who were long considered unworthy of academic analysis' (Stratton, 2023). Such an inclusive understanding of literature is also evident in many literary theoretical handbooks published in the last decade (e.g., Castle, 2013; Klarer, 2013; Bennett & Royle, 2015).

Researchers in the field of literary didactics, on the other hand, often seem reluctant to address the question of what does and does not belong to the domain of literature. In a review of literature classroom intervention studies aiming to promote social insight among students, Schrijvers et al. (2019) found that most studies in the corpus did not engage in theorizing about literariness. However, considering recent developments in literature education, there seems to be increasing space for a 'broad' definition of literature.

Firstly, this can be observed in the way the concept of 'literature' is addressed in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. In this framework, the learning of literature reading is approached through three descriptors: 1) 'Reading as a leisure activity', 2) 'Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature)', and 3) 'Analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature)'. In these formulations, 'literature' is explicitly separated from leisure reading, and literary texts are presented as a particular subset of creative texts. At first glance, the CEFR seems to maintain a classical distinction between popular texts (read frequently in leisure time) and literary texts, which are perhaps seen as complex and multivalent. However, since the boundary between 'creative texts' and 'literature' is inherently complex in practice, and the CEFR does not operationalize the concept of 'literature' explicitly, these guidelines provide ample room for a broad interpretation of the concept of 'literature', especially since attention to leisure reading is also part of the curriculum.

Secondly, the current emphasis on reading pleasure in literature education leads to more student-centered text selections. Recent studies show that contemporary literature teachers, at least in Northern Europe, consider the development of reading pleasure to be a significant goal of literature education (Ackermans, 2022; Fodstad & Husabø, 2021; Myren-Svelstad & Grütters, 2022). This aligns with findings from diachronic research on curricular changes in literature education. During the second half of the 20th century, the focus of educators shifted from culturally shaping students to developing their individual taste preferences (Verboord & Van Rees, 2009). This shift has also led to a more inclusive understanding of literature within education, with greater attention to popular texts at the expense of texts that meet the

aesthetic standards of professional literary connoisseurs. An absolute reversal of cultural values has not occurred, however, as there still exists a fundamental tension between reading at school and reading in leisure time. 'The paradox of literature education', argues Johansson (2021), 'lies in the collision between reading for pleasure—which is related to reading outside of school—and reading for education and to learn about literature' (p. 22).

Thirdly, there is an increasing interest in literature education that acknowledges the various media forms in which literature manifests itself, putting pressure on the traditional focus on the printed word. In this regard, Calafato & Simmonds (2022) advocate for 'an inclusive definition of the term literature, covering both traditional forms of literature like novels and short stories, but also magazines and newspaper articles, as well as graphic novels, comics, and picture books' (p. 2). The object of literary didactics is thus expanded to include the domain of journalism and visual culture. While Calafato & Simmonds (2022) still emphasize texts in print, there have been recent pleas for the integration of non-paper literary practices in literature education. This includes research on the use of digital literature in the classroom (Simanowski et al., 2015), studies on the didactic potential of online reading communities like #BookTok (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021; Dera et al., 2023; Dera, 2024), and calls for literature education that considers embodied experiences of literary culture, such as all-city reads or literary tourism (Persson, 2015).

Considering the developments described above, it must be acknowledged that the long tradition in which the term 'literature' is reserved for complex and often ambiguous belles-lettres, is now accompanied by a much more inclusive understanding of literature. From a literary studies perspective, this makes the concept of 'literature' even more fascinating and interesting. However, from a literary didactic standpoint, the important question arises of how students—as recipients of literature education—perceive the term. After all, if there is no consensus among scholars about what literature is, how can we expect students and teachers to be on the same page? The Reddit case from the introduction demonstrates that in practice, this issue can lead to misunderstandings and clashes between students and teachers. Therefore, there is reason to zoom in on how students understand the term 'literature'.

3. STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON LITERATURE AND THE CONCEPT OF LITERARY COMPETENCE

The ability of students to develop a coherent understanding of what 'literature' is and what it is not, could be understood as part of their overall literary competence. However, when Jonathan Culler introduced the term 'literary competence' in the 1970s, conceptualizations of the adjective 'literary' were not a point of discussion. In Culler's structuralist view, literary texts have a specific grammar that readers can analyze and interpret using the appropriate conventions. Thus, being literarily competent means being able to employ the correct reading conventions for a given literary text with the ultimate goal of uncovering its meaning. Hence, it involves

bridging ‘potential properties, latent in the object itself’ with ‘the theory of discourse applied in the act of reading’ (Culler, 1981, p. 24).

Crucial in Culler’s view of literary competence is the constitutive role of the reader in the formation of literature. A text becomes literary when the reader adopts the reading stance appropriate for a literary text. For literature education, this means that students need to learn to master this reading stance. This insight still resonates in recent definitions of ‘literary competence’, such as that of Paran et al. (2020), who define the term as ‘the ability to draw meaning from a literary text by identifying the skills required for the analysis of the text, by applying them accordingly, and by being aware of what can be gained by applying these skills’ (p. 327). In light of the previous paragraph, what is remarkable about this definition is that the adjective ‘literary’ is not further specified. Apparently, the literarily competent student must be able to identify the skills required to analyze a given text, but they do not need to assess the literary status of the text. This presupposes an educational situation in which the text selection is in the hands of the teacher: they determine which text is analyzed, and the student must then adopt the reading stance that corresponds to this text - which, according to the teacher’s choice, belongs to the domain of literature.

Aspects of this literary reading stance have been further elaborated in various theoretical models. For example, Sheridan Blau (2003) distinguishes three dimensions of literary competence: *textual literacy* (the ability to read, analyze, and evaluate texts), *intertextual literacy* (the ability to situate texts within a broader textual tradition), and *performative literacy* (the ability to concentrate and have focused attention on the literary object, including tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty). In an alternative model by Alter & Ratheiser (2021), who directly refer to the CEFR framework, literary competence is supported by four pillars. Students who are literarily competent 1) can connect with the text (including its characters) on an emotional level (*empathic competence*), 2) are able to experience and appreciate the stylistic principles of the text (*aesthetic competence*), 3) possess the ability ‘to identify and work with the specific cultural freight and framing of a text and the discourses these pertain to’ (p. 381), meaning they can read texts with a critical eye towards representation (*cultural and discursive competence*), and 4) are able to derive meaning from a literary text (*interpretative competence*).

Although these models ultimately emphasize different aspects, they share a primary focus on how students read the texts presented to them. In other words, models of literary competence tend to deal with the communication *between* readers and texts, and to a lesser extent, with how readers communicate *about* literature. A definition of literary competence that pays more attention to the discourse that students unfold about literature and literariness is provided by Witte et al. (2012), who conceptualize literary competence, following the Dutch literacy scholar Liesbeth Coenen, as the ability ‘to communicate with and about literature’ (p. 7). This communication *about* literature can involve articulating the student’s personal views on certain literary texts, but it can also manifest in the students’ ability to independently

mention narratological terms or cultural-historical movements in relation to a text they have read. However, while Witte et al. (2012) propose a sophisticated model of the development of literary competence, consisting of six ascending levels of competence that encompass both simple and complex literary texts, they too do not address the question whether students have any notion of what literature actually is.

In the meantime, the aforementioned models themselves seem to be based on strong ideas about what 'real' literature is within the context of literature education. The best readers in the developmental model of Witte et al. (2012) can handle texts with a complex structure that are 'characterized by ambiguities and implicitness, as well as by technical and stylistic refinements' (p. 23). A normative term like 'refinements' places such texts at a higher level than texts at the lowest level of competence, which have 'simple, everyday language' (p. 21). Similarly, in Alter & Ratheiser's (2019) model, literary texts are attributed with properties that indicate essentialist parameters for distinguishing literary texts from non-literary ones. In Alter & Ratheiser's view, literarily competent readers can explore literary texts 'for what they are: creative texts, purposefully constructed not merely to inform but possibly to entertain, to explore new worlds, to paint pictures with words, to question perceived notions of being, to provoke—and so much more' (p. 380). Blau is even explicitly normative, arguing that literature education should revolve around 'challenging literary texts', which encompasses 'almost every text that is said to be canonical or worthy of serious attention in a literary education' (Blau, 2014: 44).

Such normativity can be observed in other applications of the concept of 'literary competence' as well. Zabka (2016), for example, unequivocally equates literature with 'art' (p. 228), thereby seemingly excluding popular fiction from the domain of literature (and hence from that of literary competence). Nikolajeva (2010) is more inclusive, for she acknowledges that every text puts a set of requirements on its readers for an adequate cognitive and aesthetic experience. Furthermore, she explicitly distances herself from the claim 'that writerly, open, dialogical texts are unquestionably of higher artistic quality.' However, she states without hesitation: 'Yet they doubtless are more suitable for encouraging and training literary competence in young readers. The texts' resistance toward decoding is the key' (p. 157). While every text may lend itself to a literary reading stance, this reasoning implies that some texts are still more literary than others.

Obviously, there is merit to the latter proposition, even when advocating for an inclusive definition of the concept of 'literature'. However, this does not change the fact that literature on the concept of 'literary competence' is laden with normativity and that definitions of the concept do not consider the diverse ways in which the term 'literary' could be understood (and *is* understood in contemporary literary studies). The consequence of this problem can be illustrated using a hypothetical example. Imagine that the student from the Reddit case in the introductory paragraph of this article writes a short essay about the fantasy novel *The Way of Kings* (2010) by Brandon Sanderson. From that essay, it becomes evident that the student possesses the four competences underlying Alter & Ratheiser's (2019) model. For example, the

student demonstrates psychological understanding and emotional engagement with the characters Kaladin and Adolin Kholin (*empathic competence*), writes extensively about what he perceives as vivid imagery used by Sanderson to describe the different nations and peoples in the novel (*aesthetic competence*), analyzes the gender representations in the fictional world and acknowledges the presence of stereotypes (*cultural and discursive competence*), and reflects on the themes of good and evil as portrayed in the novel (*interpretative competence*). From this perspective, we would have to conclude, based on Alter & Ratheiser's model, that this student demonstrates literary competence. However, he will not convince the teacher mocked on the Reddit forum: she does not consider fantasy to be literature and therefore believes that demonstrating literary competence through Sanderson's work is not possible. If she adheres to her own literary standards, the essay is not likely to change this teacher's view. And if she is willing to compromise, it is at least necessary for the student to reflect on what makes *The Way of Kings* literary according to his own perspective or, at the very least, to engage with views on literariness that lead many professional readers, including his teacher, to categorize Sanderson's work as genre fiction rather than literature.

Hence, what is missing in the way the literary competence of students is conceptualized, is their awareness of the connotations of the term 'literature' and their ability to define their own views on literature against the backdrop of such connotations. The importance of addressing this dimension of communicating with and about literature in literature education will be clarified in the following paragraphs through examples based on empirical observations.

4. STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONCEPT OF 'LITERATURE': RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS FROM THE PROJECT *THE BOUNDARIES OF LITERATURE*

The aforementioned discrepancy between expert views on literature and students' perspectives on the term formed a central theme in the research project *The Boundaries of Literature* (in Dutch: *De grenzen van literatuur*), conducted in the Netherlands in 2021-2022 and funded by the Dutch National Agency for Educational Research (NRO). The findings of this project (Dera et al., 2022) provide empirically obtained insights into the research question posed in the introductory paragraph of this article: *What do 10th-grade students consider as literature?* First, a brief overview of the research project *The Boundaries of Literature* will be provided, followed by a description of the three instruments used in the project to investigate students' conceptions of literature.

4.1 *The research project The Boundaries of Literature*

In the Netherlands, it is legally mandated for students in the highest levels of secondary education to take literature exams. These levels concern 'havo', a program of five years (7th grade – 11th grade) preparing for universities of applied sciences,

and 'vwo', a program of six years (7th grade – 12th grade) preparing for research universities. Unlike in many Western countries, there is no top-down determined list of works that students must read. Instead, students in the majority of Dutch schools choose themselves which literary works they read for their literature exams. The requirement for havo students is a minimum of eight works, while vwo students must read at least twelve titles (including three titles written before 1880). The exam guidelines explicitly state that students should be able to provide well-reasoned reports on their reading experiences with these selected literary works. They should also be able to recognize and differentiate between literary genres and employ literary concepts in text interpretations, as well as demonstrate a general overview of Dutch literary history.

These competency standards are open-ended, resulting in a highly heterogeneous nature of literature education in the Netherlands. What students read for their literature exams varies from school to school and even from student to student. An exploratory study involving over 1600 Dutch students revealed that the sample included a staggering 1642 unique titles selected for the exam (Dera, 2019; Dera, 2021). Generally, students suggest titles to their teachers and inquire if these works are allowed to be read for the exam. This is because students often find it challenging to determine if their book choices meet the criterion of being *literary* works, as explicitly stated in the exam guidelines. In this practice, teachers act as gatekeepers, determining which titles can be deemed 'literary' and which cannot, often without having read the books in question themselves (cf. Dera, 2020; Dera, 2018). Due to their emphasis on fostering reading enjoyment, teachers increasingly allow texts that they perceive to have relatively low literary complexity, such as young adult literature and thrillers (Oberon, 2016; Ackermans, 2022). Consequently, the variety of text types in literature education increases, further contributing to its inherent heterogeneity.

This situation places Dutch literature educators in a dilemma. On one hand, the competency standards require students to develop literary competence based on the reading of literary works. On the other hand, many teachers aim to accommodate students' reading preferences, that often lean towards fantasy and romance rather than the psychological or philosophical novels typically recommended by their teachers (cf. Dera & Van Doeselaar, 2022). This creates a tension between the goals of fostering reading enjoyment and developing reading competence in literature education—a friction that is inherently not exclusive to the Dutch context. It has been underscored internationally that mandated reading in schools engenders resistance among teen students, while simultaneously, teens' engagement with books and reading can be an integral facet of their identity development (cf. Reeves, 2004). Prescribed reading may, at times, be incongruous with what are commonly referred to as out-of-school literacies. The need to ameliorate this disjunction is paramount (Alvermann & Moore, 2011).

Hence, the aim of the project *The Boundaries of Literature*, a collaboration between three university researchers and three secondary schools in the Netherlands,

was to develop a series of lessons for 10th-grade students at the havo and vwo levels that organically integrated both reading enjoyment and developing reading competence. To achieve this, a didactic approach was developed that incorporated genres highly valued by students into literature education without compromising the desired level of literature lessons set by teachers. Specifically, within the project, a series of lessons was designed in which half of the texts covered were chosen by students themselves—without restrictions. The teachers involved in the project selected the other half of the texts and designed assignments in which students compared their chosen texts with the texts introduced by the teachers.

At the end of the lesson series, students were expected to be able to (1) articulate their reading experiences with prose fiction, (2) apply narratological concepts in the interpretation of prose fiction, and (3) argue when a prose text could, in their view, be considered 'literary'. The development of the corresponding lesson series was guided by three literature didactic design principles:

- a) Actively aligning with students' reading preferences: A portion of the material is chosen by the students themselves to promote their autonomy and feelings of competence. This is based on the idea that supporting autonomy in reading education has positive effects on both reading motivation and comprehension (cf. Van der Sande et al., 2023), and that giving students a say in the curriculum leads to an increase in feelings of competence (cf. Patall et al., 2008).
- b) Comparative reading: Students compare two texts directly, guided by two questions: which text is the most engaging, and which text is the most literary? Of course, the answers to these questions might overlap. To provide guidance for comparative reading, students are invited to use narratological concepts, specifically tension, space, time, characters, perspective, theme, and motifs. This comparative didactic approach is derived from research on youth literature education, where literary texts for adolescents are read in relation to thematically related texts for adults (Van Lierop-Debrauwer, 2020).
- c) Collaborative reading: The comparison of texts takes place systematically in reading groups, giving the lesson series a dialogic character. This choice is based on the insight that literature education in which students engage in discussion with each other about their reading experiences and interpretations of a text, has a high learning yield in terms of literary-analytical insights (Janssen, 2009).

The primary texts used in *The Boundaries of Literature* are, as mentioned, half chosen by the students. To accomplish this, the researchers and teachers involved in the project first created a ballot based on a survey conducted among 187 10th-grade students from the three participating schools. The survey asked students for titles they would recommend to their classmates. Through a voting procedure (thoroughly described in Dera et al., 2022), six novels were ultimately selected. A five-member

teacher panel from the participating schools added six texts to the selection, with the criterion that these texts should be thematically related to the novels that received the most votes from the students. This resulted in six texts, each of which was associated with one of the narratological concepts guiding comparative reading (design principle b). Since it was not feasible to read twelve complete novels within the scope of the lesson series, the teacher panel selected a representative excerpt of approximately 800 words from each novel for the comparison. The selection criteria included the extent to which the specific concept was evident in the excerpt; the extent to which the overall theme of the novel was recognizable in the excerpt; and the extent to which the excerpt could be understood independently of the rest of the novel. For each text pair, students were presented with five to six discussion questions to shape their comparison. Table 1 provides an overview of the texts used in the lesson series.

Table 1. Texts used in the project *The Boundaries of Literature*

Students' choice	Teachers' choice	Relation	Narratological concept
Suzanne Vermeer, <i>Bella Italia</i> (2011)	Gaea Schoeters, <i>Trofee</i> (2020)	Thriller element	Suspense
Patty van Delft, <i>Dragan Duma: Zij die hoort</i> (2014)	Richard Osinga, <i>Arc</i> (2011)	Fantasy/Science fiction element	Space
Arthur Japin, <i>Een schitterend gebrek</i> (2003)	Stefan Brijs, <i>Post voor mevrouw Bromley</i> (2011)	Historical novel	Time
Mel Wallis de Vries, <i>Wreed</i> (2014)	Simona Atangana Bekono, <i>Confrontaties</i> (2020)	Adolescent protagonist	Characters
Thomas Olde Heuvelt, <i>Echo</i> (2019)	Gerda Blees, <i>Wij zijn licht</i> (2020)	Detective-element	Perspective
Herman Koch, <i>Het diner</i> (2009)	Geert van der Kolk, <i>De waterverkoper</i> (2012)	Murder motif + family relations	Theme & motifs

The lesson series developed in *The Boundaries of Literature* consists of nine lessons. In the first lesson, the teacher divides the class into groups of four students. These groups are informed that they will act as a literary jury in the upcoming lessons, evaluating twelve texts, half of which are chosen by the students and half by the teachers. The task of the jury is to argue which text they consider the best and which text they consider the most literary by the end of the lesson series. In the opening lesson, the students discuss the criteria they want to use for their evaluation. They are also informed about the characteristics mentioned by many connoisseurs to distinguish literature from general fiction in terms of content, structure, form, and language use (e.g., ambiguity, artistic language, formal complexity, openness, poly-perspectivity).

In the following six lessons, the students engage in comparative discussions within their jury groups about the text fragments listed in Table 1. During each lesson, the teacher first explains the central narratological concepts, using direct instruction. Then, to minimize differences in reading pace among students, the fragments are read aloud by the teacher, after which the students address the discussion questions within their jury groups. The first discussion question always asks which text the students find most appealing and why, ensuring a jury element in each lesson. To maintain the coherence of the series, the discussion questions also refer back to narratological terms previously discussed.

The last two lessons focus on the final jury process. In the penultimate lesson, the groups reach a jury verdict, which they summarize on a poster. The final lesson is dedicated to a class presentation of the posters and a collective reflection on the jury process and its outcomes in the different groups.

The lesson series was implemented twice in the project: once as a pilot in one of the participating schools (School A; $N=28$ students), and then in its final form in the other two schools in the project (School B; $N=24$ students; School C; $N=24$ students).

4.2 *Relevant research instruments from the project The Boundaries of Literature*

In the research project *The Boundaries of Literature*, data was primarily collected to examine whether the developed teaching approach was appreciated by students and to assess the learning outcomes of the lesson series. However, the collected data can also be used to shed light on the guiding question of this article (*What do 10th-grade students consider as literature?*) Three specific data sources are particularly relevant for this research question. The accompanying methodological backgrounds will be discussed below.

4.2.1 *Survey*

At the end of the aforementioned lesson series, a digital survey was conducted among the participating students in the two schools where the final series was implemented. The main purpose of this survey was to capture student evaluations of the lesson series. It was completed by 48 students, including 26 boys (54.2%), 18 girls (37.5%), 1 student identifying differently (2.1%), and 4 students who did not indicate or disclose their gender (8.3%). One of the questions in the survey, which primarily consisted of Likert statements (see Dera et al., 2022), is relevant to this article: the open question 'Please provide your definition of literature'. The 48 answers to this question were analyzed using open and axial coding. Initially, the characteristics mentioned by the students were open-coded and then grouped into overarching codes that reflected the essence of the mentioned attributes. For example, the answers 'Literature involves stories in which beautiful words are used' and 'Literary texts are written in a special style' both fall under the category of 'Texts with a special style or beautiful language', and were thus grouped under an overarching category.

This coding process resulted in 20 attributes that some students identified as characteristics of literature (see table 2). To ensure the reliability of these attributes, a second coder conducted an independent analysis based on the 20 overarching codes derived from the axial coding process. The interrater reliability was found to be high (Cohen's $\kappa = .828$).

4.2.2 *Transcripts of student discussions*

During the lesson series, students worked together in heterogeneous groups of four. With the consent of the students and their parents, conversations from seven of these groups were recorded using a voice recorder. The groups were randomly selected for inclusion in the research project. Table 2 gives more details on the groups involved in the research. More information about the collected recordings per school is available in Dera et al., 2022.

Table 2. Recorded group discussions in the project 'The Boundaries of Literature'

Group number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
School	A (pilot)	A (pilot)	A (pilot)	B	B	C	C
Level	Havo	Havo	Havo	Vwo	Vwo	Havo	Havo
Gender balance	1m/3f	2m/2f	2m/2f	2m/2f	2m/2f	3m/1f	2m/2f

A research assistant transcribed all 43 conversations ad verbatim, ensuring the anonymity of the students. Participants were given numerical codes (1 to 4), while explicit references to student names were not transcribed. To determine whether the learning process during the discussions was efficient enough to conduct further analyses, the research assistant also calculated the *time on task* per conversation, which is the percentage of time students actually spent on the assigned task (Muijs & Reynolds, 2010). This measure varied significantly between groups and lessons (see Dera et al., 2022). Two groups consistently met the time on task limit recommended by Muijs & Reynolds for effective learning, which is 80%.

Although the variation in time on task indicates low task-related motivation in some groups, the transcripts can still be used to gain insight into how students talk about literature and literariness. To do so, it is firstly relevant to analyze whether and how the participants spontaneously apply the narratological concepts introduced in the lesson series. This analysis helps to assess the students' literary analytical skills, which adds depth to their perspectives on literature and literariness. For each conversation, it was noted (1) to what extent students independently used narratological concepts in their discussions and (2) to what extent they demonstrated the ability to substantiate those concepts in relation to the text fragments. In the first step, attention was not only given to target narratological concepts used by the students (such as *perspective* or *motif*), but also to students' own expressions and idioms when dealing with literature (i.e.: students calling an excerpt 'evocative-ish'). In the second step, evident misinterpretations (e.g., remarks conflicting with the

content of the text) and misconceptions (e.g., confusing acceleration and deceleration in the analysis of literary temporal progression) were also noted.

Secondly, the transcripts were analyzed for so-called postulative statements about the concepts of 'literary' and 'literature'. In the study of literary reviewing practices, the term 'postulative statements' is used to refer to passages in reviews where critics make general statements about (the nature of) literature (cf. Praamstra, 1984). In the interactions between students, similar statements occur, in which participants (whether or not prompted by the discussion question) reflect on issues related to literariness. These statements were marked and interpreted during the analysis. All transcripts, in Dutch, can be consulted in the digital attachments accompanying Dera et al., 2022.

4.2.3 *Jury posters*

As a conclusion of the lesson series, students created posters summarizing the results of their jury deliberations. On these posters, they indicated which text from the lesson series they considered the best and identified the text they found most literary and the one they deemed least literary. The choices were explained during an oral presentation, which was not recorded due to ethical considerations, with many students indicating that they felt uncomfortable with being recorded during a whole-class presentation. Nonetheless, the poster presentations serve as a relevant data source for gaining insights into student definitions of the concept of literature. Eleven posters contained elaborate arguments to explain which text students deemed most and least literary. The core of these arguments was determined by the author of this article through open coding (see table 3). Application of the resulting coding scheme by an independent research assistant resulted in a perfect Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 1.0$).

5. 'LITERATURE' THROUGH THE EYES OF STUDENTS: EMPIRICAL OBSERVATIONS

5.1 *Survey question 'What is literature?'*

The 48 participants who answered the open survey question 'Please provide your definition of literature' at the end of the lesson series *The Boundaries of Literature* provided a total of 54 (partial) definitions of this concept. One student directly quoted what was stated on a Wikipedia page; this definition was not included in the analysis. Table 3 summarizes the essence of the provided definitions and indicates their proportion to the total.

Approximately one-third of the responses (categories 8, 9, 19, and 20) tend towards characteristics often mentioned in classical definitions of literature: writing as an art form, with a special treatment of language and a deeper, complex meaning. Although they seldomly mention both content-related and formal characteristics of

texts, students who provide such definitions seem to understand what most Dutch literature courses state, namely that literary language must be distinguished from everyday language. Moreover, apart from the students defining literature as ‘a thing of beauty’ (19) or ‘writing as an art form’ (20), they are able to specify concretely what they consider to be specifically literary (either style or underlying meaning).

Table 3. Student definitions of ‘Literature’ in the questionnaire

Essence of the definition	Number of mentions (% , N=54)
Literature is...	
1 ... pretty cool	1 (1.9%)
2 ... books recommended by teachers/experts	2 (3.7%)
3 ... what determines whether you appreciate a story	1 (1.9%)
4 ... a long story	1 (1.9%)
5 ... a mode in which we write and understand texts	1 (1.9%)
6 ... a beautiful concept	1 (1.9%)
7 ... a text with appealing elements	1 (1.9%)
8 ... a text with an underlying / deeper meaning	8 (14.8%)
9 ... a text containing a special style / beautiful words	9 (16.7%)
10 ... a text of high quality	1 (1.9%)
11 ... a story/text	6 (11.1%)
12 ... a story that balances between difficulty and easiness	1 (1.9%)
13 ... a story containing literary characteristics/conventions	7 (13.0%)
14 ... a collective term for all literary things	1 (1.9%)
15 ... something that influences you as a person	1 (1.9%)
16 ... reading	1 (1.9%)
17 ... original	1 (1.9%)
18 ... boring stories with difficult words	6 (11.1%)
19 ... a thing of beauty	2 (3.7%)
20 ... writing as an art form	2 (3.7%)

In contrast, there are students who lean towards a classical definition of literature but remain highly abstract in their formulation (categories 7, 10, 13, and 14). Particularly, the definition ‘Literature is a story containing literary characteristics/conventions’ (accounting for roughly 1 in 8 definitions) resembles circular reasoning.

More than a quarter of the definitions are so superficial (categories 1, 4, 6, 11, 16, and 18) that it is doubtful whether the students in question have learned anything substantial about literature and literariness after completing the lesson series. In the case of the definition ‘Boring stories with difficult words’, it is possible that a negative reading attitude hinders an unbiased definition.

Considering all the data in table 3, it appears that a minority of the students in the project were able to provide a well-argued definition of the term ‘literature’. When such a definition *is* provided, students often focus strongly on one aspect of literariness (e.g., style or depth). Given that their definitions were collected after a lesson series in which students consistently reflected on the literariness of text fragments, it is striking that such a large portion of the students fail to make any distinction between ‘texts’ in general and ‘literary texts’ in particular. The mechanism of

satisficing, where survey respondents exert little effort to optimally answer questions, may also play a role here (cf. Krosnick & Presser, 2018). In that sense, the reported picture may, in reality, be more favorable than the survey responses suggest—or less favorable, considering the possibility that students provide socially desirable answers.

5.2 Student discussions

5.2.1 Use of narratological concepts

Although the lessons in *The Boundaries of Literature* were explicitly linked to narratological terms, and students were instructed to connect the narratological concepts covered in previous lessons to the discussed text fragments at the end of each discussion, narratological terms played only a marginal role in the discussions among the students. In the 39 analyzed conversations, it occurred only 4 times that a student mentioned a narratological concept that had been covered in the lesson series *without* being prompted by a discussion question. These instances include the terms *suspense* (1x), *chronology* (1x), and *perspective* (2x). Additionally, students occasionally used terms that were not covered in the lesson series, but could be associated with literary or narrative discourse. These terms included *visually written*, *metaphor*, *gaps*, and *cliffhanger*.

Overall, across all three schools participating in the project, students only employed narratological concepts when explicitly prompted to do so. According to the developmental framework proposed by Witte et al. (2012), this suggests that the students have limited literary competence, since independently using such concepts is considered an indicator of advanced competency. To provide further insight into the use of narratological terms, a more detailed analysis of two terms covered in the lesson series is presented: *space* (lesson 2) and *theme/motifs* (lesson 6).

As shown in Table 1, the concept of space was linked to excerpts from the young adult fantasy novel *Drägan Duma: Zij die hoort* (2014, student choice) by Patty van Delft and the speculative fiction novel *Arc* (2021, teacher choice) by Richard Osinga. Based on the comparative approach in the lesson series, students were required to compare the depictions of space in both fragments. They were guided by probing questions that aimed to elucidate the thematic function of space. In the case of *Drägan Duma*, the question asked whether Van Delft's depiction of space contributes to the tension between dreams and reality in the fragment under discussion. The fragment describes how the adolescent protagonist, Jill, looks out of her window upon waking up and sees a dragon standing in the meadow across from her house. Only one of the recorded group discussions includes a student who is able to make a relevant connection between the meadow and the interplay of dream and reality. This student recognizes that something abnormal is happening in a very ordinary location and observes that friction arises because 'the surreal, abnormal event takes place in a completely ordinary place'. The other groups either fail to provide an

interpretation ('a meadow is not particularly special') or remain stuck in a realism framework ('a dragon in a meadow is not realistic').

Similarly, in the case of *Arc*, only a few students manage to interpret the depiction of space. The fragment under discussion describes how the protagonist, Neil Canterbury, descends into a space in the Indian city of Varanasi with a cult leader named Dharma, leading to a room where the revered guru of Dharma's sect resides. It is a stuffy and dark room with a window overlooking the Ganges. The probing discussion question relates to the symbolic role of the river: might it be significant that the scene takes place around the Ganges? Reasoning from the concept of symbolic space, which the students were introduced to in the same lesson, readers might find it meaningful that the room of an worshipped guru overlooks the Ganges, the Hindu river of liberation that partially illuminates the dark room.

However, not a single group manages to provide a symbolic interpretation of the river in their discussions of the fragment. While some students can associate the Ganges with 'the ancient Indian culture' and know that it is a sacred river, they do not explicitly explain the value or significance it holds. Most students search for images of the Ganges on their phones and comment on what they see, ranging from 'It's filled with trash' to closely following the course of the river on Google Maps. This underscores the general trend observed in the transcripts regarding space as a narratological concept: students can identify specific places in the text that are related to the depiction of space, but, in general, they do not engage in meaningful interpretive analysis. In the case of *Arc*, this may be partly attributed to a lack of cultural knowledge and digital research skills (students rely on visual material found rather than textual sources).

The narratological concepts of theme and motifs were applied in the series of lessons to passages from Herman Koch's novel *Het diner* (2009, student choice) and Geert van der Kolk's *De waterverkoper* (2012, teacher choice). In the spirit of comparative reading, students had to identify a story motif that connects the fragment from *Het diner* with that from *De waterverkoper*. Both texts involve a murder (in Koch's novel, a group of boys, including the protagonist's son, set a homeless man on fire, while Van der Kolk writes about a drug murder in Haiti). Furthermore, the murderers in both novels are caught in the act: in *Het diner*, they are captured on surveillance footage, while in *De waterverkoper*, first-person narrator Nodieu witnesses the murder.

Only one group manages to concretely identify these thematic parallels: these students identify 'witnessing the commission of a crime' as the element that connects *De waterverkoper* with the video footage from *Het diner*. Another group comes somewhat close to a convincing parallel: they see the detailed narration of the crime as the connecting element, with Nodieu and the camera as 'narrators', respectively. The remaining groups fail to identify a connecting element; they simply stick to the words 'murder' or 'attack', or they do not agree on an answer at all.

Moreover, in three of the seven transcribed conversations, a conceptual problem surrounding the concept of motif occurs. The involved students interpret the term

'motif' directly as a *leitmotif* and thus look for recurring objects in the text fragments, while the discussion assignments emphasize *story motifs*. This narratological misconception hampers successful comparative reading. There are students who do not come up with an answer, because they 'do not see a camera' in *De waterverkoper*, while conversely, there are groups that discover a recurring boat in the second fragment, which they do not find in *Het diner*.

What becomes clear from the examples discussed, is that students struggle with various pillars encompassed by Alter & Ratheiser's (2019) literary competence in their discussions of the read text fragments. They encounter difficulties in terms of interpretative competence in interpreting symbolic space and identifying themes, while the Ganges in *Arc* tests their cultural and discursive competence. It is striking that these problems do not only arise in the texts chosen by the teachers, but also in the fragments from the novels the students themselves have decided to study. The question about the portrayal of space in the young adult fantasy novel *Drägan Duma* presented similar interpretative difficulties for these students as the question about the Ganges in the widely recognized literary novel *Arc*.

5.2.2 Statements by students about literature and literariness

Just like the students rarely introduce narratological concepts on their own, most of them also make few postulative statements about literature. However, two out of the seven groups contain individual students who occasionally do so. The first student finds the style of the fragment from Gerda Blee's novel *Wij zijn licht* (lesson 6) uninteresting, because it reminds her of 'such storybooks, *Dork Diaries* things (...), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*'. Here, the popular children's book series by Rachel Renée Russell and Jeff Kinney are used as negative reference points: according to the student in question, texts like these are definitely not representative of literature. Another student in a different jury group uses a similar frame: she finds Thomas Olde Heuvelt's creation of his literary universe in *Echo* (lesson 6) unsuccessful, because it is 'unrealistic' and 'not made realistic for me either', suggesting that there is no suspension of disbelief in the text. In that sense, for this student, *Echo* cannot compare to J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which she uses as a literary reference point.

As with the narratological terms, most expressions about literature and literariness are, however, elicited by explicit discussion questions. In the group discussions described above, with the concepts of space and theme/motifs as a guide, students had to indicate which fragment they considered the most literary and why. For two out of the seven groups, the presence of *open spaces* was a decisive criterion: a text is more literary to the extent that more remains open. Two other groups see the *quality of the writing* as the most important criterion: a text is more literary to the extent that it is better written. However, these jury groups do not elaborate on what constitutes a well-written text, and it also seems subject to change. For example, one of the groups considers Osinga's text stylistically stronger than Van Delft's, but then those same students find Koch's text more literary than Van der Kolk's because the

fragment from *Het diner* is 'simply easier to read'. Where 'well-written texts' were initially defined based on style, only four lessons later the definition shifts to readability.

The other three groups each adopted their own line of argumentation, namely:

- *Maturity*: a text is more literary to the extent that it is more intended for adults. The group that holds this view describes *Drägan Duma* as 'a bit childish, a bit... young adult'. One of the students involved interprets that genre as stereotypical genre fiction: 'Someone ends up in a magical world... it's the *Harry Potter* idea.'
- *The applicability of narratological concepts*: a text has characteristics of literature if it can be approached through narratological concepts. The group that embraces this perspective seems to consider all narrative texts as literature (after all, concepts like space, time or perspective can be applied to any prose text).
- *Depth*: a text is more literary to the extent that there is more to say about it. This students' view on depth does not so much concern the depth of the text itself, but rather the opportunity the text provides for extensive discussion.

Interesting is that none of the groups, apart from a few individual students, weigh multiple criteria against each other. Although a majority of the groups mention characteristics of literature that also play a role in academic discussions, one perspective (such as writing style or depth) tends to dominate the conversation. It is also striking that some groups adopt positions that are unlikely to receive the approval of most literary scholars. More specifically, this concerns the idea that young adult texts are not literary (because they are 'childish') and the reasoning that texts that can be analyzed narratologically are automatically considered literary.

5.3 Jury posters

Table 4 provides a concrete overview of the arguments the jury groups used to determine what they considered the most and least literary fragment in the lesson series. The arguments are derived from the 11 posters on which the juries noted their findings.

In the left column, aspects of language use are most broadly represented, accounting for about one-third of the arguments. For many groups, the handling of language is thus an important aspect of literariness - although a description like 'Good punctuation' is at least curious in this context.

Interesting in the left column are arguments such as 'Good description of space', 'Good use of narratological concepts', and 'Good use of time'. These imply that some students have come to see the use of narratological devices as a distinguishing criterion for literariness, an observation that has already been made based on the transcribed student conversations. A small group of arguments is more related to the reading experience than to the question of what makes a text literary ('You want to keep reading', 'Fun text', 'Written in a thrilling manner'). The remark 'Recommended by every teacher' is interesting, as it reflects a more functionalist view of literature:

works that are recommended by people knowledgeable about literature, such as literature teachers, are considered 'literary'.

Table 4. Arguments for the most literary (N=25) and the least literary (N=25) fragment according to students

Most literary (number of mentions)	Least literary (number of mentions)
Nice/beautiful use of language (6)	Superficial/no depth/too easy (5)
Good description of space (3)	Bad/too easy use of language (4)
Good plot (2)	English language use (2)
Well-developed characters (2)	Standard characters (2)
Recommended by every teacher (1)	Many swear words (2)
Deeper meaning (1)	Ordinary (1)
Use of proverbs and idioms (1)	No use of narratological concepts (1)
Good use of narratological concepts (1)	Not visually written (1)
Good use of time (1)	Not original (1)
Good punctuation (1)	Unclear use of space (1)
Fun text (1)	Unclear character (1)
Literary themes (1)	Incredulous (1)
Description of a nice culture (1)	Weird punctuation (1)
You want to keep reading (1)	Predictability (1)
Written in a thrilling manner (1)	Few descriptions of character's thoughts (1)
Unique storyline (1)	

Many of the arguments in the right column reappear in classical and sometimes somewhat essentialistic discussions about the distinction between popular fiction and literature. The non-literary is then presented as superficial and lacking in depth, with easy language use and psychologically uncomplicated characters. More than half of the arguments given by the students for the least literary fragment fit within this line of reasoning. Here, too, a focus on narratological concepts can be observed in some groups, although to a lesser extent than in the left column: non-literary texts are those that do not make exceptional use of literary concepts such as space. Noteworthy are the arguments 'Many swear words' and 'English language use', taken from the fragments from *Wreed* and *Confrontaties* in Lesson 5. For several groups, (Dutch) literature apparently clashes with the use of English words and swear words in a story.

Overall, the posters show that a large portion of the students involved can provide plausible arguments to distinguish the texts they consider literary from those they do not, often using arguments that also arise in academic discussions. In that sense, they seem to have developed an awareness of how the notion of 'literature' could be defined and can argue why they consider certain texts to fall under that category or not. However, there are also groups that, after nine lessons of immersion, do not go beyond defining a literary text as 'a text that you want to keep reading' or 'a fun text'. In short, there is considerable variation among the students.

6. CONCLUSION: LITERARY COMPETENCE AND STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS OF LITERATURE

The empirical observations from the project *The Boundaries of Literature* clearly show that students do not have homogeneous views on what literature exactly is or could be. In this research, the jury groups used different criteria to determine when a text can be called 'literary', and their views do not always align with arguments considered valid in literary scholarship (namely, the idea that literature is written for adults and that literature can be recognized by the applicability of narratological terms). In addition to being heterogeneous, students' concepts of literature were also ill-defined. At the end of the series of lessons, in which many groups struggled with narratological and interpretative skills, only a third of the students were able to provide a reasoned definition of the term 'literature', while a quarter of them remained stuck in very general definitions such as 'books' or 'stories'.

In this sense, the question 'What do 10th grade students consider as literature?' cannot be answered unambiguously. On the one hand, in their reflections on the term, many students touch upon aspects that are also considered established characteristics of literariness in academic discussions: depth, distinctive language treatment, openness. On the other hand, these aspects are rarely mentioned in conjunction with each other, and there are also students who associate literature with thrilling texts or even books in general. Underlying this is the view that any narrative text is a literary text. This is a perspective that even the most inclusively thinking literary scholar is unlikely to endorse.

The question occurs, then, what these observations on students' widely heterogeneous takes on the concept of literature mean for the study of literary competence in literature education research. If we understand literary competence as the ability to communicate *with* and *about* literature, we must recognize that the students in *The Boundaries of Literature* struggled with both. Communicating *with* literature proved to be difficult because students had difficulty arriving at text interpretations based on narratological analyses - even with the texts they themselves had contributed, which are, in most cases, not indisputably considered 'literary' by professional readers. Communicating *about* literature was complex for many students because they seemed to lack developed views on what can be called literature and what cannot.

The existing models for operationalizing literary competence do not take this last element into account. Hence, the ability to articulate what literature actually is—according to the reader themselves and according to prevailing opinions in the literary field—should be part of the operationalizations of literary competence. Speaking strictly theoretically, this is necessary because the normative connotations of the adjective 'literary' seep into the way researchers have written about literary competence so far (as outlined in paragraph 3 of this article). Based on the empirical observations from *The Boundaries of Literature*, attention to students' conceptions of

literature is necessary because we cannot assume that students inherently understand that 'books' are not synonymous with 'literature'.

At a time when more and more teachers focus on fostering reading enjoyment and selecting texts that take into account students' reading preferences, the ability to attribute meaning to the term 'literature' may be more relevant than ever before in literature education. Specifically, the recent model by Alter & Ratheiser (2019) should be supplemented with a fifth pillar: *taxonomic competence*, or the ability to reason about what can be called literature and what cannot, and to assess texts accordingly. The taxonomically competent student is able to guide these reasonings based on knowledge of conceptions and connotations of the term 'literature', encompassing both classical notions of literariness and the more inclusive approach characteristic of contemporary literary scholarship.

Although the empirical observations in this article indicate that students' taxonomic competence deserves attention, they also have limitations, if only because they are based on relatively small samples. The students' survey responses are also more shallow than their answers would have been in semi-structured interviews. Moreover, the students' transcribed conversations did not primarily focus on specific distinctions between literary and non-literary texts, while the arguments on the posters were not examined in conjunction with the verbal presentation of the same posters. To gain more insight into what taxonomic competence entails, then, it is important to conduct further research specifically focusing on how students understand and apply the words 'literature' and 'literary'. Appropriate research tools for this could include semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students about their understanding of the term 'literature', either with or without vignettes in the form of concrete texts presented to the participants. In quantitative-oriented research, it would be interesting to present large groups of students with ranking tasks, where different texts need to be placed in order from least to most literary. This task is also well-suited for additional qualitative research, such as think-aloud tasks. The reasoning students use when performing such tasks can provide insights into the functioning of taxonomic competence in the context of literature.

Before that happens, however, the floor is once again given to the Reddit user with whom this article began. 'She basically thinks that Tolkien's books aren't "real literature"', this student wrote on the internet forum about his literature teacher. In cases like this, incorporating the question of what defines 'real literature' into our literature education and consistently addressing the diverse range of answers in the literature classroom could potentially mitigate both confusion and unnecessary frustration.

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