INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE "MODELLING PROCESSES OF COMPREHENSION, AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, AND INTERPRETATION IN LITERARY CONVERSATIONS"

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Conversations are a core component of literature classrooms across the world. There are many reasons for this – and not all of them are good ones. Talk about literary texts in the classroom partakes of the same structures governing communication between teachers and students in all subjects. Critical educational researchers have long drawn attention to these communicative structures as being hierarchical and not conducive to insights, as fostering conformity rather than critical thinking (Bellack et al., 1966; Mehan, 1979; Stevens, 1912). Within the scholarly discourse on literature education, too, the conversational triad of (teacher) Initiation, (student) Response and evaluative (teacher) Feedback, with its known-answer questions, has been criticized as inappropriately restrictive with regards to potential meanings of literary texts (Wieler, 1989) and as a means of reproducing the "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968) and social inequality in literature classrooms (Brandmayr, 2014) instead of empowering students and enabling them to read and think independently.

On the other hand, great hopes have also always been placed on dialogues for fostering all sorts of learning and opportunities for personal development (Wegerif, 2011, 2013). Literature education researchers have emphasized the importance of conversations for aesthetic experiences and literary learning in the classroom, too (Beck & McKeown, 2006; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Härle et al., 2014; Martin, 1998; Raphael & MacMahon, 1994). Härle et al. (2014) even base their model for literary conversations on the theoretical tenet that both hermeneutical and post-hermeneutical literary theories view understanding as fundamentally dialogic in itself (cf. also Frank, 2000).

These conflicting theoretical claims and didactical controversies have contributed to an increasing number of empirical studies which seek to ascertain what effects specific forms, types, and structures of literary conversations really have on students (Murphy et al., 2009). This empirical quest for the outcome of classroom conversations about literature was also motivated by a shift in the discourse on L1 education which has emphasized measuring and enhancing the effective fostering of competencies among students (Brüggemann et al., 2015).

As Murphy et al. point out in their meta-study (2009, p. 744f.), though, this empirical research has been faced with methodological challenges. Empirical research into classroom conversations has long been dominated by methods like Conversation Analysis (Sacks et al., 1974; Sidnell & Stivers, 2012), which explicitly limit themselves to the description and explanation of verbal interaction and refrain from speculations about mental or other internal processes occurring in the individuum. Mehan, in his seminal conversation analysis of classroom communication, famously quoted Garfinkel's dictum:

> There is no reason to look under the skull, since there is nothing of interest to be found there but brains. The skin of the person is to be left intact. Instead questions will be confined to the operations that can be performed upon events that are 'scenic' to the person. (Garfinkel, 1963, cited in Mehan, 1979, p. 129).

This "anti-mentalism" of conversation analysis has limited its potential to enter into a symbiotic relationship with the thriving fields of cognitive research into

comprehension processes (Philipp, 2020; Spiro et al., 1980; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; van Oostendorp & Goldman, 1999), empirical research into the interplay between the cognitive and affective dimensions of aesthetic experience (Magirius et al., 2023; Menninghaus et al., 2018; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Schrott & Jacobs, 2011; van Peer, 1986; van Peer et al., 2021) and classroom intervention studies on literary interpretive skills (Levine & Horton, 2013).

The growing interest in how conversations in literature classrooms can foster comprehension, aesthetic experience, and interpretive response led, therefore, to a first wave of quantitative studies which measured the effects of certain types of conversation through experiments with pre- and post-treatment-tests of the aforementioned mental performances.

Over the past few years, though, increasing interest in how individual mental processes and collective communicative processes exactly interact has required a widening of the methodological base of capturing and analysing processes of communication about literature in classrooms and other places of learning. Data collection increasingly draws on a wide array of methods and technologies (videography, eye-tracking etc.), while the analysis of classroom conversation data has come to increasingly apply categorizing methods like Grounded Theory Methodology, Documentary Analysis, and Qualitative Content Analysis, too, none of which had been designed specifically with sequential communicative interaction data in mind and thus required methodical adaptations.

The time has come to both explicitly reflect on these methodological innovations in our field, and at the same time to gather some of the promising current studies into the interplay between different dynamics of classroom conversations and different processes of text comprehension, aesthetic experience, and interpretation of literary texts, and to further systematize their insights against the backdrop of the theoretical models which they draw upon.

This is what this Special Issue undertakes to address. It brings together a meta-study, two contributions which sketch two educationally relevant competing models of literary reception processes and sum up the two diverging strands of discussions on how conversation in the classroom can help learners immerse themselves in and master these reception processes. Three empirical classroom studies follow, which analyse the potential of three very different classroom conversational formats (peer talk on observations of reading models; literary conversations following the Heidelberg Model; debates) and how they can foster different types of comprehension processes (“deep reading”), aesthetic experiences, and interpretive practices (“fusion of horizons”), employing three fundamentally different methodological approaches (one mixed-methods experimental intervention study with pre-, post-, and follow up-tests at its core; one documentary analysis; one qualitative content analysis). The last study looks into the communicative practices, funds of knowledge, self-reflections, and beliefs of teachers – the people without whom no insights generated by research would ever reach classrooms.

Aslaug Fodstad Gourvennec and Margrethe Sønneland present the results of a meta-study of Scandinavian qualitative empirical studies into literary conversations in the 21st century so far. They measure a sharp quantitative increase in this field of research from the century's first decade to the 2010s and 2020s. Contrasting with this dynamic change is the great theoretical and normative continuity which they observe among the studies: Reader response theory/reception aesthetics provide a broadly shared common ground in literary theory, while personal and social ideals of a democratic *Bildung* seem to be universally shared within this research field in the Scandinavian countries. The studies under scrutiny stretched across all school types and grades and collected data from group as well as whole class conversations about a great variety of literary texts. With regards to methods, while conversation analysis and interaction analysis were still chosen by half the studies under scrutiny, the other half employed categorizing methods (content analysis) or analysed the data without reference to an established methodological framework, drawing on their theoretical concepts for their analyses instead. With regard to the results of these studies, Gourvennec and Sønneland observe a tendency to reaffirm the dominant format of "litterære samtaler", which resembles internationally known formats like Book Clubs or Literature Circles but is structurally more loosely defined. The two authors conclude that more explicit methodological reflection and more transparency with regards to how presented data excerpts are chosen are needed in order to ensure that empirical studies are not used as mere illustrations for pre-existing theories. They also call for more studies which measure the longitudinal effects of the type of conversation about literature which dominates Scandinavian classrooms.

The great amount of theoretical convergence observable in this research community could provide a foundation for quantitative studies aiming for generalizable insights into the effects of a well-established communicative format on the literary socialization of students. Hopefully, the following contributions of this Special Issue can provide both impulses for further methodological reflection as well as alternative theoretical perspectives on literary conversations which can be fruitfully compared and contrasted with the Scandinavian model of *litterære samtaler*.

The theoretical outline of one such quantitative study, also planned in a Scandinavian context, is described in the contribution by *Michael Tengberg, Margrethe Sønneland* and *Maritha Johansson***.** Based on Russian formalist and post-structuralist literary theories as well as more recent educational theories of dialogic learning, the authors provide a model of literary aesthetic experience as "defamiliarization" and engagement with "undecidability". They provide arguments for the plausibility of their hypothesis that modified Inquiry Dialogues about complex literary short stories will facilitate such aesthetic experiences, primarily by highlighting the compatibility and overlaps between dialogic theories of literature (Bakhtin) and dialogic theories of learning (Alexander; Wegerif). An intervention

study in 30 eighth grade classrooms across Scandinavia to test this hypothesis is planned.

A different aspect of literary response—"high-level comprehension"—is modelled in another theoretical contribution by *Marco Magirius, Daniel Scherf* and *Michael Steinmetz*: Also, while the previous contribution emphasized peer talk among students and a facilitating role of teachers, Magirius et al. focus on identifying criteria for teachers' questions and support which are most conducive to fostering high-level comprehension of literary texts among students. Drawing on a number of previous studies as well as empirical data from their own projects, they identify "testability", "disputability" and "urgency" as characteristics of teacher questions which help students bring their comprehension of a literary text to a higher level. Together with an examination of appropriate forms of support for students, which the authors derive from task research, they present a combined concept of "Instructive Dialogues" aimed at promoting high-level comprehension of literary texts.

Comparing these two theoretical contributions, it is especially interesting to see how the different authors approach, at least in part, the same widespread feature of literary texts—their polysemy or ambiguity—but frame it in the one concept as "undecidability" and as "disputability" in the other concept, and how these frames, together with the attention on different aspects of literary response, lead to focusing on peer talk among students in the one concept and adaptive teacher moves in the other concept. Both teams of authors have announced further empirical studies to test their hypotheses. It will remain interesting to see which research methods might be suitable to verify or falsify their assumptions, and how the different outcomes of such future studies can be related to each other.

The next three contributions all report on recent empirical studies into literary conversations in school classrooms.

Corina Breukink, Huub van den Bergh and *Ewout van der Knap* conducted an intervention study aimed at improving "deep reading" (also described as "comprehension at the macro-level")—a concept very similar to that of "high-level comprehension" in the previous study—in 10th grade Dutch classes through observational learning and peer conversations reflecting on the differences between various model readers and themselves while reading expository texts, literary prose, and poems. During six lessons, the treatment group watched Eye Movement Modelling Examples of 8th, 10th and 12th grade students who showed markedly divergent reading behaviour, discussed these differences, and read literary texts on their own, again discussing how they had read them. The treatment group showed significantly greater increases in macro-level comprehension tests than the control group, especially with regards to comprehending poetry. Given the design of this intervention, these improvements in literary comprehension must owe to metacognitive learning. Learning reports and interviews highlight how not only the innovative stimulus of the EMMEs, but also the repeated opportunity to discuss

observations about differences in reading processes with peers (and only occasionally also with the teacher) played a role in facilitating this metacognition.

The contribution by *Caterina Mempel* and *Johannes Mayer* showcased literary aesthetic experiences of elementary students with special needs and gifts made in literary classroom conversations shaped in accordance with the "Heidelberg Model" (Härle et al. ,2014). Similar to how literary aesthetic experiences were modelled by Tengberg et al., Mempel and Mayer focus on how ambiguity of literary texts is experienced. In order to reconstruct such experiences and the orientations underlying the cultural practice in which they happen, they conducted their multimodal interaction analysis of videographed conversation data within the framework of the Documentary Method. They view common ownership for pupils' attempts at sense-making and confidence in their abilities to experience the text in meaningful ways as fundamental to a successful fostering of aesthetic experiences of literary ambiguity in classroom conversations. Because of this focus on the personal level, Mempel and Mayer propose a comparatively flexible approach to the Heidelberg conversational format, even combining it with scaffolding mechanisms like deliberate pauses, murmuring phases and focusing support.

Where Breukink et al. aim for deepened comprehension and Mempel and Mayer for positive aesthetic experiences of literary ambiguity, *Dominic Nah*'s empirical study looks at literary interpretation as an outcome of in-school communication about literary texts. And just like previously reported studies focused on conversational methods, which were frequent in their (hitherto exclusively European) cultural educational contexts—litterære samtaler in Scandinavia, resp. the opposition between the Heidelberg Model and more neo-Socratic approaches in Germany—Nah studied a type of conversation more typical of Singaporean classrooms: debates. Nah's definition of interpretation is based on Gadamerian hermeneutics. He asks whether classroom debates can open up students for the "ethical invitations" of post-colonial literary texts. To answer his question, he examined debates on poems in Singaporean 10th grade classes, using Qualitative Content Analysis, which lends itself to the coding of such longer and more structured verbal contributions. He found both "opening" interpretations (in the Gadamerian sense) and "closing" confrontational arguments in a number of cases analysed in his study, and emphasized the positive role which constructive feedback from student adjudicators can play.

The last contribution—another empirical study—focuses on teachers and the resources they draw on as initiators, facilitators, moderators, and participants in literary classroom conversations. *Anna Sigvardsson* and *Sarah Levine* studied collegial talks about poems among Swedish teachers and compared their approaches towards the poems and the "funds of knowledge" they drew upon when the collegial talks were framed as "Book Clubs" vs. when they were framed as "lesson preparations". They collaboratively coded the resulting transcripts and observed that in the Book Club condition, the teachers immersed themselves much more into the text world, empathized with the speakers, built their interpretations on these

personal reactions, and judged the style of the poems in accordance with how it had affected them. When told to plan lessons collaboratively, the same focus groups concentrated on more distant stances towards the poems and their speakers, and designed tasks in which language use was to be analysed and interpretations were to be reached through comparison with other thematically related texts. Sigvardsson and Levine conclude that, while this may go against cultural models of teachers' roles and methods, teachers (and their students) might profit from drawing more on their everyday funds of poetic knowledge and interpretive practices.

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This Special Issue features a broad spectrum of empirical studies into conversations about literature—and two theoretical contributions which also outline future empirical projects—none of which uses the classical methods of conversation analysis or interaction analysis. This is because their research interests in modelling how classroom conversations contribute to the comprehension of literary texts, to aesthetic experiences, and to literary interpretations require analytical approaches which focus on the reconstruction of mental processes among the participants of conversations. The contributions offered some glimpses into what such "mentalist" research can elucidate, and how e.g. tests and categorizing methods can be adapted fruitfully to the analysis of classroom conversations on literature. Hopefully, this publication can contribute to an ongoing systematization of these methodological adaptations, and also stimulate dialogue between conversation analysts and researchers drawing on these alternative methods.

With regard to results, it has become evident that we have not yet established a clear and detailed picture of what kinds of didactical approaches and conversational formats are most conducive to fostering comprehension, aesthetic experience, and interpretation of literary texts. Yet, research into literary classroom talk is clearly participating in the wider discourses on literary learning and its outcomes: Studies into conversational fostering of comprehension can base themselves on ample cognitive reading research, and two contributions to this Special Issue have both focused on the highest levels of comprehension processes as targets for dialogic learning. Studies into aesthetic experiences can draw on more than a century of reader-oriented literary theory and on empirical aesthetics, too—two contributions to this Special Issue have emphasized the experience of literary ambiguity, openness and its potential to de-automatise the way we think, read, and speak. Already, these two observations raise the question of whether and how they can be integrated into coherent, overarching frameworks of how students (learn to) deal with and talk about literature. A lot more dialogue and research are needed here, e.g. with regard to students who do not participate in such classroom conversations and what enables teachers to set constructive impulses, to serve as model readers, or to integrate students of different backgrounds into a common practice of communication about literature.

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