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INTERPRETATION AND LITERARY COMPETENCES: EMPIRICAL APPROACHES TO KEY CONCEPTS IN LITERARY EDUCATION

EDITORIAL

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The notion of interpretation almost seems unavoidable when trying to describe literary understanding. A common opposition is the one between ordinary understanding of texts and interpreting literary texts: While pragmatic texts can be "understood" and made use of, a literary text asks for more: for interpretation. This is of course a far too simplistic distinction. However, theoretical as well as empirical approaches to literary understanding often work on the specifics of reading literary texts and/or reading texts literary and point to interpreting as a key activity or interpretation as a product. Within hermeneutics, texts traditionally needed interpretation because they could not be understood at first sight: juridical, theological and literary texts might demand a second reading or more in order to work out what could be "meant". Giving meaning to a literary text (as well as to other texts) means generating this meaning via an often complex text-reader-interaction. This interaction is – especially within literary communication – considered to be a creative process that can lead to manifold results.

However, are all these results rightly called interpretations? And how can the diverse interpretative acts be characterised further or even evaluated? In institutional learning there might be normative expectations of what an interpretation

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should cover: from a sound textual analysis to the elaboration of the text-intention, often stressing the link between textual features and their interpretation. This notion has been criticised by – among others – literary theorists but also by practitioners and researchers in literature education who insist on dynamic aesthetic perception.

Given the shift to reader-orientation since the 1980s in literature education and the impact of cognitive reading psychology, it is not surprising that focussing on interpretation means focussing on literary competences to a large extent: competent readers are those who are able to interpret – and here again further differentiation is needed: what are the relevant operations that cumulate in a thorough and satisfying understanding, in an interpretation of a literary text? And what other factors – such as motivation, experience and attitudes – are involved? How can development be described? Here, research as well as educational practice is facing obstacles – literary praxis being a manifold cultural activity and literary reading being a complex cognitive activity.

Thus, when analysing literary understanding of learners, empirical researchers still feel the lack of instruments that offer reliable measurement for interpretation. Besides, when designing learning arrangements practitioners as well as researchers feel the need to clarify which techniques or strategies prove helpful for students.

The contributions of this special issue explore different dimensions of the theme all related to learning with literature. The papers by Theo Witte and colleagues and by Volker Frederking and colleagues lead to instruments which may help practitioners and researchers to specify the level of literary competences yet achieved. *Theo Witte, Gert Rijlaarsdam and Dick Schram* offer a theory of literary development in upper secondary education which is derived from empirical data and partly based on the practical pedagogical content knowledge of teachers. The aim of the presented study was to develop an instrument which helps to describe differences of students in literary competence and which shows what a developmental route in upper secondary education could be. The study explored this route via expert discussions: teachers were addressed as professionals whose practical pedagogical content knowledge can serve as a basis of modelling a path from experiential reading via several stages to literate and academic reading.

Volker Frederking, Sofie Henschel, Christel Meier and colleagues start from a distinction between functional reading literacy and literary literacy. A central element of literary literacy is the ability to understand literary texts, a notion which needs to be elaborated further. They offer a theoretical model which is derived from Umberto Eco's semiotics, namely Eco's notion of the intentio operis. The multidimensional construct – semantic literary literacy, idiolectal literary literacy and contextual literary literacy – is empirically validated and discussed in light of an assessment-study with a sample of 1300 ninth-graders in German secondary school. The reported project results in a reliable and valid measure for the two dimensions of semantic and idiolectal literary literacy which might serve in intervention studies at a later stage.

In a study on understanding metaphor *Irene Pieper and Dorothee Wieser* specify the interpretative operations of secondary school students when dealing with poetic texts under think-aloud-conditions. Specific attention is given to the textual factor: poetic metaphor is somehow unique, challenges in interpreting metaphor need to be specified with regard to the literary text and its metaphor/metaphors. Pieper and Wieser provide a coding system which allows for the characterisation and distinction of interpretative operations. Methodological issues are also dealt with.

Both the studies by Frederking and colleagues and by Pieper and Wieser point to the necessity to move closer to the actual teaching of literature and to classroom research. This is a starting point of the project by *Brenton Doecke and Piet-Hein van de Ven*. The study they report on involved teachers reflecting on their own and on others' literature teaching. Literature education is seen in its social frame. Researchers as well as the teachers involved insist on the communal aspect of literary praxis, meaningfulness being achieved in ongoing negotiations among participants. Interpretation is conceived of as provisional and essentially linked to the process of interaction. Thus, the potential of classroom discourse about literature and the key-role of the teacher who designs the pathway to interpretation is stressed.

All contributions to this special issue go back to papers discussed during the symposium of the Special Interest Group on Literature Education at the 8th IAIMTE-conference in Hildesheim/Germany (2011): `Interpretation – a key concept in literary education II`. The SIG had started on the issue in Toronto 2009. As our awareness had risen both during the conferences and when designing the special issue for the need of more systematic approaches to the concept of literary interpretation and for empirical educational research we decided to offer a short bibliography listing empirical studies on literary interpretation. This bibliography was prepared by *Silke Kubik*. Her results – gained from an inquiry that basically concentrated on key terms around literary interpretation – can be helpful for developing and contextualising future research. Given the difficulty to trace relevant research via the keywords mentioned, it is all the more obvious that more definiteness and clarity with regard to terminology can be wished for in research on literature education.

Papers in this issue:

Witte, Th., Rijlaarsdam, G., & Schram, D. (2012). An empirically grounded theory of literary development. Teachers' pedagogical content knowledge on literary development in upper secondary education. (Special Issue, guest edited by Irene Pieper & Tanja Janssen), *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 12* , pp. 1-33.

Frederking, V., Henschel, S., Meier, C., Roick, T., Stanat, P., & Dickhäuser, O (2012). Beyond Functional Aspects of Reading Literacy: Theoretical Structure and Empirical

Validity of Literary Literacy. (Special issue guest edited by Irene Pieper & Tanja Janssen). *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 12* , pp. 1-24.

Pieper, I., & Wieser, D. (2012). Understanding metaphors in poetic texts:towards a determination of interpretative operations in secondary school students' engagement with imagery. (Special issue guest edited by Irene Pieper & Tanja Janssen). *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 12* , pp. 1-26.

Doecke, B., & Van de Ven, P.-H. (2012). Literary praxis: Engaging with texts in classroom settings. (Special issue guest edited by Irene Pieper & Tanja Janssen). *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 12* , p. 1-21

Kubik, S. (2012). Studies on Literary interpretation in the classroom. A bibliography. Special issue guest edited by Irene Pieper & Tanja Janssen. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 12* , p. 1-16.