Dialoguing on a Graphic Novel in the Language Learning Classroom with Upper Secondary School Students

Christina Hedman* & Ulrika Magnusson

Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract

Drawing on a larger project on teaching Swedish as a second language to migrant upper secondary school students in Sweden, this paper focuses on one teacher’s literature class and a book-group discussion about a graphic novel based on Selma Lagerlöf’s *A Tale of a Manor*. The aim was to contribute to further knowledge on the dialogic potential of teacher-led literary discussions on graphic novels with language learners, by focusing on the cumulative aspect of the interaction. We also analyzed the teacher’s role and how it affected the students’ responses and interpretations. Our findings show how the cumulative dialogue created new student insights relating to the novel’s protagonists, literary themes and the saga genre, which is central in Lagerlöf’s novels, and how literary concepts and visual cues were used as resources for interpretation. The discussion of the graphic novel included multifaceted and multimodal analyses, in which the teacher urged the students to formulate interpretations and responses anchored in both the written text and the images. This teacher-led dialogue holds great potential for encouraging students’ literary reading, as well as their confidence when it comes to giving responses to literature, which is of relevance to similar language and literature teaching contexts.

Keywords: book-group discussions; collaborative dialogue; graphic novel; literary reading; second language education

Introduction

The graphic novel has been found to provide significant benefits in the language learning classroom, such as “rich opportunities for negotiation of understanding and meaning” (Bland, 2015, p. 25), building on research that investigates the graphic

*Correspondence: Christina Hedman, e-mail: christina.hedman@su.se

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novel in all its complexity and from a variety of perspectives (see e.g. King & Page, 2017; Tabachnick, 2017).

One challenge for teachers in the language learning classroom is, however, how to take advantage of the composite multimodal interplay between the written text and the images (Chun, 2009). Teachers may also be challenged by the inherent contradictions in teaching and assessing literary reading on the one hand, and the readers’ fundamentally personal responses to reading on the other (e.g. Rosenblatt, 1994). A focus on students’ personal responses, being at the heart of literary reading, is often a favored approach by teachers, together with the view that reading is pleasurable and emotionally engaging. Teachers could thus experience tensions between a “focus on literary competence and literary experience” (Gouvrannec et al., 2020, p. 5), not least in the language learning classroom, where language comprehension often needs to be addressed (Hall, 2015). As a consequence, inference, interpretation and the indeterminacy of literary reading (Hall, 2015), including moral and social insights often attached to the reading experience (Nussbaum, 1998; see also Bloom, 2001), may be left out.

In this light, Hall (2015) advocates for group projects in which learners engage both with each other and with the text, and where they “accommodate newer understandings of the personal as well as social and interactive nature of reading” (Hall, 2015, p. 214). Of interest to this paper is how such literature-related interactions involve collaborative dialogue (Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016), which may also have a language scaffolding function in the language learning classroom.

More specifically, we explore one literary group discussion that was marked as an exam, where we focus on the dialogue and not on the examination per se (see section “The study”). The dialogue involved three upper secondary school students and their teacher, Stephen, as part of the school subject Swedish as a Second Language (SSL), which is aimed at Swedish language learners. SSL replaces the school subject Swedish (SWE; cf. English Liberal Arts) and provides the same formal eligibility for tertiary education (Hedman & Magnusson, 2020a, b). Due to goals similar to those of SWE, it requires academically challenging content regarding language, literacy and literature, meaning that students in SSL should ideally not be exposed to below-age-level literature and reductionist approaches to literary reading. How this potentially challenging task is carried out by teacher Stephen in teacher-led dialogue is the focus of this paper. We do not focus specifically on the challenges involved in reading in a second/additional language as such considerations are thought to be part of the teacher’s professional expertise; in this case, a qualified SSL teacher with extensive experience in language learning classrooms. In addition, Stephen was a qualified and experienced SWE teacher who strove to teach literary content with a similar focus, and to the same extent as in his SWE classes when teaching SSL (Hedman & Magnusson, 2020a).

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2 All names are pseudonyms.
All these aspects provide motivation for focusing on Stephen’s dialogic teaching approach, with the overall aim of contributing further knowledge about dialogic potential in teacher-led literary discussions of graphic novels in the language learning classroom. The focus is specifically on the cumulative aspect of the interaction, where interlocutors build on each other’s contributions (see below). We therefore ask: (1) What are the relevant features of the cumulative dialogue in the analyzed examples, building both on the images and the written text? and (2) How does the teacher’s dialogic approach create spaces for student responses and interpretations of the literary content?

**Literature review**

In the Nordic context, several researchers have explored literary book-group discussions in language learning classrooms. In Sweden, Economou (2015) studied discussions of a novel in an upper secondary SSL classroom in which themes pertaining to language, immigration and integration were explored. These were, however, questioned by the students as essentializing. In another study, Wilinger (2021) explored practices of literary reading in classes attended by highly educated adult learners of Swedish, which also took into account their leisure time reading. The findings showed these experienced readers’ advanced and “abstract” reading skills (Wilinger, 2021, p. 83), and examined their new identities as they developed into readers in a new language (Wilinger, 2021). These studies do not, however, focus on the cumulative nature of dialogue, nor the development of responses. In a study by Walldén (2002), dialogue was explored in relation to a graphic novel read by children in Grade 4, focusing on the literary aspects related to the novel’s characters. The children’s dialogue was found to support their understanding and creative, inference-based engagement with the text. Walldén (2020) also analyzed book-group discussions involving adult language learners in intermediate language education, showing a main focus on scaffolding understanding of the novels. Further, in a study of a combined class of upper secondary students in SSL and SWE, Granqvist (2023) analyzed their recurring book-group discussions over time. Student confidence and responses – and a sense of social and linguistic belonging – were found to develop in these literary groups (for studies on book groups as inclusive practices, see also Goatley et al., 1995; Kong & Pearson, 2003; Polleck, 2010). Although Walldén’s (2020, 2022) and Granqvist’s (2023) studies analyze dialogue, they do not focus on the use of graphic novels in relation to adolescents.

The potential of the graphic novel in the language learning classroom has mainly been considered outside the Nordic context. Some studies emphasize, for example, work with graphic novels as a multimodal pedagogical practice (Pishol & Kaur, 2015; see also Baetens & Frey, 2015), which may foster students’ written and visual literacies (Öz & Efecioğlu, 2015; see Derrick, 2008). Building on a literature review, Chun (2009) concludes that the graphic novel may complement literacy pedagogy, which has hitherto not sufficiently acknowledged the dynamics of image and text relations.
We find this applicable also to the teaching of literature. Bland (2015) stresses how the complexity of the graphic novel offers rich opportunities for meaning-making among language learning adolescents, particularly when they are given the opportunity to negotiate meaning in groups, as a safe space, including the understanding of words and text in the new language (Van den Branden, 2008; see also Burwitz-Melzer, 2013; Lazar, 2015). One study of primary and secondary school students’ responses to images in picture books in the English learning classroom shows learners’ development of “visual grammatics” both for text interpretation and their own creation of texts (Unsworth & Macken-Horarik, 2015, p. 56). In line with these findings, we emphasize that meaning is constructed both in the written text and the images (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and that teachers and students need to pay attention to both of these meaning-making modes.

Theorizing literary reading, dialogic teaching and the graphic novel

Although there are specific challenges involved in reading in a second/additional language, literary reading may pose challenges to all readers. Hall (2015) observes, for example, that much of what might be difficult in literature is not only found at text level, but is a discourse phenomenon: “The problem for the literary reader is often rather ‘What does it all mean, and why am I (the reader) being told this?’ These are central concerns of literary reading, i.e., the need to infer” (Hall, 2015, p. 24).

With Rosenblatt’s concept of aesthetic reading, these inferences and “transactions” are fundamentally personal, and a literary work “happens during a coming-together [...] of a reader and a text” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 12), meaning that a text or a poem is “embodied in a process resulting from a confluence of reader and text” (p. 16). The response approach to literary reading, with its focus on the reader’s relationship with the text, also implies a role for the teacher that stimulates us “to grow in our own capacities to participate creatively and self-critically in literary transactions” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 148). Dialogue and discussions of interpretations of meanings, including “mistakes, hesitations, re-readings and re-thinkings” (Hall, 2015, p. 55), are desirable and consistent with such a view, since indeterminacy and ambiguity are recognized as being characteristics of literary reading (see Langer, 2000).

However, literature education building on a transactional view does not imply an anything-goes approach, as this view insists on the text and “accepts a concern for validity of interpretation” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 151). McRae (1996) suggests a set of question-types to support and assess different levels in reading as one way for teachers to encourage students to make connections to the literary text. These connections may include cross-referencing, quoting, summarizing and balancing arguments, as well as relating personal perspectives to “objective criteria,” such as literary concepts framed in the curriculum (McRae, 1996, p. 37). Beyond these, questions may also aim to identify motivation and causation (Langer, 1990), including characters’ motives and why the story develops as it does and is told the way it is.
According to Hall (2015), the teacher’s questions should aim to advance discussions to make novice readers confident in exploring their own responses and those of others, building on authentic questions and “the incorporation of previous answers into subsequent questions” (Hall, 2015, p. 215), as well as the teacher’s evaluation and furtherance of student contributions (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). In our analyses, we draw on central principles in dialogic teaching, as outlined by Alexander (2008; see Mercer, 2000) and applied by Klingelhofer and Schleppegrell (2016). These principles are collective, reciprocal, supportive and cumulative, and form a dialogue where teachers and students reciprocally “share ideas and consider alternative viewpoints” and “articulate their ideas freely and help each other reach common understandings” (Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016, p. 71). We see cumulative dialogue as being the most interesting and relevant dialogic principle for our purposes, “as cumulation allows learners’ ideas to develop in depth and complexity” (Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016, p. 71). Cumulative dialogue builds on interactions that expand in creative and non-repetitive ways, since interactants “actively work together to build connections between each other’s ideas, developing a shared understanding or line of inquiry” (Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016, p. 71; see Alexander, 2008). We also consider these dialogic principles important for students’ collective envisionment-building (Langer, 2000), in which the teacher helps a student build and expand on their understanding and impressions of their reading, inter alia – in our case – through cumulative dialogue.

As the analyses in the current study center on a graphic novel, it is also vital to understand some of the theoretical-conceptual underpinnings of its construction. Groensteen (2007, p. 133) emphasizes the complexity of the graphic novel – here referring to comics – as it “constitutes an organic totality that associates a complex combination of elements, parameters, and multiple procedures” in coherent ways. Groensteen (2007, p. 135) highlights a set of principles pertaining to, for example, the fact that (main) characters often are expressive, relating to the principle of expressivity, and that the graphic novel must be legible, which may entail certain simplifications or typifications of characters. Synecdochic simplification implies that certain elements need “to have an immediately informative character.” Although the graphic novel in the current study features these characteristics, they are not at the center of the analyses but are used as theoretical tools for understanding responses connected to the novel’s images.

The study

The school, the students and the literature lessons

This study draws on a larger ethnographic project relating to teaching practices and ideologies in SSL (e.g. Hedman & Magnusson, 2020a, b) in three upper secondary schools with a high proportion of migrant students.3 The participating students had

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3 According to Swedish statistics for this period, students with a foreign background in these schools ranged from 55 to 75 per cent.
chosen the school subject SSL, which was taught by qualified teachers (equivalent to 90 or 120 ECTS⁴ in the university subject SSL).

The current paper is based on our fieldwork at Rowan upper secondary school,⁵ where we regularly observed Stephen’s SSL classes during the course of more than a school term, with both of us writing fieldnotes. The students originated from various parts of the world, for example, from countries in West Asia and Eastern Europe. As final year students, their SSL lessons were at an advanced level.

In the literature classes, Stephen used various types of novels, both modern and classic, such as the graphic novel Selma Lagerlöf’s The Tale of a Manor, which is an adaptation by Marcus Ivarsson (2013) of Lagerlöf’s novel from 1899, and Lagerlöf’s The Emperor of Portugallia from 1914. During our fieldwork, we observed Stephen’s lessons, in which literature was discussed and analyzed thematically, and literary concepts were applied, in line with the course requirements. For example, in relation to Sophocle’s Oedipus, concepts such as conflict, theme, protagonist and antagonist were taught, as well as Greek genres and the concept of the choir. The drama was also compared thematically to Julie Otsuka’s The Buddha in the Attic, focusing on “secrets and lies” and the futility of trying to escape fate.

In the lessons preceding the examination of the graphic novel Selma Lagerlöf’s The Tale of a Manor, the students were presented with literary concepts and concepts relating to the images contained in graphic novels (e.g. a code of feelings, code of movements and text plates). Parts of the novel were read in class, during which Stephen posed various questions in the same way that he would in the examination group discussions, to familiarize the students with this type of text talk. Additionally, one lesson was devoted to the upcoming group discussions. Stephen generally created an open and warm social atmosphere in his SSL groups (Hedman & Magnusson, 2020a, b), in which he was open to student-initiated dialogue, and he usually strove to engage the students in the discussions.

The graphic novel Selma Lagerlöf’s The Tale of a Manor
The examination group discussion revolved around Selma Lagerlöf’s The Tale of a Manor, as adapted in the graphic novel by Ivarsson (2013). As evident from interviews with Ivarsson in the Swedish media, the author has striven to keep the plot close to Lagerlöf’s novel (see Nya Värmlands-Tidningen, November 11 2013).⁶ The story centers on a university student named Gunnar Hede who neglects his studies but loves to play the violin. When he learns about the financial plight of the family estate (Munkhyttan), he tries to save it from being sold. Unfortunately, he fails, and

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⁴ European Credit Transfer System.
⁵ All names are pseudonyms.
⁶ Fyra års arbete med Lagerlöfs berättelse – nwt.se – ditt Värmland, just nu! (archive.ph) [“Four years working on Lagerlöf’s story”]
the resulting shame and despair drive him into a state of madness.\footnote{We use the terms “madness” and “mad” as these appear in the novel.} An important twist in the story is the encounter between Hede and a young woman, Ingrid, whose life story is also unfortunate, as she was adopted by a minister whose family treats her badly. Ingrid is saved by Hede, who wakes her up with his violin when she is about to be buried alive, as she is thought to be dead. Ingrid falls in love with him, and Hede’s mental health issues are finally cured by Ingrid’s love.

Ivarsson was inspired, in particular, by the saga or dream-like features of the novel (see also Karlsson, 2002, regarding these aspects in Lagerlöf’s work\footnote{Here, the saga theme involves dream-like, sentimental and melodramatic elements.}), as is evident in the images of the graphic novel. The novel focuses on Hede, who is easily recognizable in the images (\textit{typification}) as the protagonist and who is often portrayed in close-ups focusing on his facial expressions (\textit{expressivity}), sometimes in combination with other images of his milieu. Elements may also be foregrounded to emphasize certain content in line with \textit{synecdochic simplification}. On some pages, the story is mediated relatively substantially by written text quoting Lagerlöf’s original wording.

\textbf{Methodology}

The group discussion under study completed a theme about this graphic novel in the literature education of the SSL class. We also attended another group discussion about the novel and four examination group discussions about another novel, and Stephen provided us with audio recordings of discussions from other groups. Nevertheless, we chose to focus on one of these groups to be able to more closely analyze the dialogue and the students’ responses. We also found that this group involved a great deal of student interaction. Although the examination \textit{per se} was not our focus, this fact may have spurred both teacher and students to engage more fully in the conversation and the teacher to more attentively follow up on student-initiated threads.

We frame this study of an examination literature discussion as an exemplary case (Mitchell, 1984), since our findings have potential relevance to similar contexts. Importantly, the dialogic style of this discussion is representative of other conversations about literature from our long-term observations, illustrating and exemplifying what seemed typical to this language learning classroom. The application of dialogic teaching to a graphic novel in a language learning classroom may also allow for analytical generalization (Firestone, 1993).

The group discussion with three final year students, Sara, Ana and Nura, and their teacher Stephen, was conducted in a separate room at Rowan, with the students and their teacher seated around a table, and lasted for about 40 minutes. Both of us, the researchers, were seated on the sidelines in the same room.

The audio recording of the discussion was transcribed and subsequently translated into English (see the Appendix for the original transcript\footnote{We are grateful to Dr Jeanette Toth for helping us transcribe the literary discussions.}). The transcript adheres
to standard writing conventions, including, for example, rules of punctuation, apart from three dots indicating a longer pause, a dash indicating a restart, and a string of uppercase letters showing emphasis.

We first read the transcript individually and then discussed it together, in relation to theory, previous research and the guiding research questions. In relation to the first research question, we explored elements of the *cumulative dialogue*, which we traced via analyses of expansions of meaning, examining how the turns built upon “each other’s contributions, add[ing] information” and “construct[ing] shared knowledge and understanding” (Mercer, 2000, in Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016, p. 71). For the dialogue to be cumulative, the turns must interconnect in ways that construct further insights (Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016). Examples of this include the space given to students’ responses to the text, such as when responses are explored further in the development of interpretations. We were also open to the possibility that the participants’ responses might diverge. We thus investigated aspects characteristic of literary reading (Hall, 2015), involving the search for motivation and causation (Langer, 1990) with respect to the characters’ motives, and reasons for the story to be narrated and to unfold in certain ways. Here we included openness to the indeterminacy of literature and the fact that interpretation might not be agreed upon.

In relation to the second research question, we were attentive to Stephen’s role in advancing the dialogue, for example, by giving legitimacy to responses through building on students’ utterances, including possible language support. We also paid attention to occurrences of “objective criteria” (McRae, 1996) in terms of requests to summarize, find support for interpretations in the written text and images, and apply literary concepts. In addition, we were attentive to how Stephen asked students to verbally describe meanings in images as a means of anchoring interpretations in the text.

In sum, our analyses of three chosen excerpts (see below) thus focus on the characteristics of cumulative dialogue, and aspects of literary reading, mainly as elicited by Stephen. The chosen excerpts highlight dialogue that revolves around the main character (see Collective verbal portrayals in cumulative dialogue), central aspects of the novel (Negotiating interpretations of central themes), and dialogue around visual cues (Analyzing the genre of the saga through interpretations of images). The excerpts follow the novel’s chronology, and include both written text and images.

**Findings**

In this section, we discuss the themes outlined above. Two images from the novel are shown in relation to Excerpts 1 and 3, as these images were discussed in these excerpts. The images are, however, not analyzed *per se* as part of our findings.

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10 We have the author’s permission to publish the images. The author retains the full copyright to these images.
**Collective verbal portrayals in cumulative dialogue**

Excerpt 1 comes from the beginning of the dialogue. The excerpt starts with Stephen asking the students to look at the page where Hede is first introduced via an image (Figure 1; numbers are line numbers).

**Excerpt 1**

268 Stephen: What do you think – imagine-wise. When you look at the first image, we see him [clears his throat] here, what are your thoughts about him here?

269 Sara: Where?

270 Ana: There.

271 Stephen: This is Hede. This is how we see him for the first time.

272 Sara: He is…

273 Nura: He -

274 Sara: Well, there are people like that, who you can say, well, there are people who are inside, for example, artists, who…

275 Stephen: Mmm.

276 Sara: Are, well, those who are, what do you call it, those who are, for example, hung-up in their – they used to being in their own world. So they live their lives… His – he plays the violin that he liked, he didn’t think about anything else.

277 Stephen: Mmm.

278 Nura: Well, I think that the images portray an important person, and at the same time restless, who, like, does nothing.

279 Stephen: Yes.

280 Sara: Mmm.

281 Stephen: What are the reasons for his not doing anything, then?

282 Ana: Because.

283 Nura: He’s just drinking coffee and enjoying life.

284 Ana: Ah, yes.

285 Nura: Does nothing, has nothing. If it was another image, well, like, he is perhaps shown in a… When he, for example, er, works, holding a spade.

286 Stephen: That’s right.

In Excerpt 1, a joint depiction of Hede’s character is created through cumulative dialogue, based on Stephen’s initial question about the image of Hede. Sara’s portrayal of Hede as an absent-minded artist, who does not care about much besides his violin, is seemingly built on her own conceptions about artists as people (line 276). Nura extends the judgment and anchors her interpretation in the image (line 278), as requested by Stephen, noting a tension between being “an important person” and being “restless” (line 278). She thus indicates that Hede is portrayed as an important person. Stephen asks why Hede does nothing (line 281), asking for specific details, spurring the students on to express how these characteristics can be derived from the image. Through elaboration of each other’s utterances, Nura (lines 283, 285) concludes that Hede is a carefree character, who, in contrast to what is expected of him, avoids working and studying. This conclusion is evident in comparing his drinking coffee in the image to other possible deeds, such as
handling a spade or studying (related to Hede’s farming origins and his being a university student at Uppsala).

Thus, the students interpret how the image relates to the composite central character as a whole, that is, as a kind of personal response (Rosenblatt, 1994) to the meaning of the coffee cup and Hede’s character. In their balancing of certain interpretations or arguments, they reach a specific conclusion (McRae, 1996), which seems to be requested by Stephen (lines 271, 281). In the image (see Figure 1), the students focus on the idleness of the central figure, with his back to the reader. This joint interpretation is supported by the characteristics of the image’s emphasis on certain traits (synecdochic simplification), and Hede’s dreamy gaze (typification; Groensteen, 2007). The dialogue is cumulative and reciprocal (Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016), in that the students build on previous exchanges and Stephen’s affirmations (275, 277, 279), in non-repetitive ways to achieve a shared understanding of Hede. The focus of Stephen’s questions is to initiate discussion on the theme, and to elicit the students’ thoughts about Hede as derived from the image. Another focus is requesting specific details by anchoring the conversation in the image, and affirming the students’ responses.

Figure 1.

From the conclusions drawn in Excerpt 1, the identity of the main character is established by the group. Further on in the dialogue, the participants also describe another important character, Ingrid. According to their analyses, Ingrid lacks love in her life and is afraid that no one will love her, but she also saves Hede through her love, which
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makes her strong and brave. The theme of love is thus established, formulated by Ana as “belief in the power of love;” this was the point of departure for the dialogue in Excerpt 2.

Negotiating interpretations of central themes
As is evident in Excerpt 2, an important part of the group discussion was negotiating central themes in the novel, such as love and madness.

Excerpt 2
381 Nura: Well, I think, I – I think you didn’t understand me. I said that Ing – I saw Ingrid as a person who was sad and scared at the BEGINNING of the book. I never mentioned Hede. So LATER, when Hede comes, THEN everything in her life changes completely, ‘cause it arouses feelings in her. She falls in love with him even, she long – she has a sense of longing all the time.
382 Stephen: Mmm.
383 Nura: And to SEE him, she – well, I – THAT is what I meant. I meant.
384 Sara: Yes.
385 Nura: I didn’t mean that Ingrid was scared, or sad.
386 Stephen: No, right, no, exactly.
387 Nura: Throughout the book, but I was about to come to that.
388 Sara: [Inaudible] love and madness, those are the two themes that, well, it’s about all the time.
389 Ana: Because…
390 Stephen: What did you say now, that…?
391 Sara: It’s about, you see, in the book itself, it’s madness and love, that’s all the time, well, like that close to each other, that’s these two.
392 Stephen: Mmm.
393 Sara: That are most important, so there’s nothing else.
394 Nura: I think that too, yes, well, love is the strongest theme in this, also apart from madness.
395 Stephen: Mmm.
396 Nura: But love is the most well, erm, for example, Hede, and, or, goes for a walk, for the love of his town, Munkhyttan. Ingrid, who also is another, erm, person, who may be interpreted as a protagonist in the book too, erm... gets – lacks love, but then she GETS love from Hede. So it’s more about love.
397 Stephen: How does she get love from Hede?
398 Nura: Ehm, by...
399 Stephen: /.../ that’s right.
400 Sara: [Discussion about the pages]
417 Sara: That, ehm, “Hede did not think that he could tell her how he loved her, that could not be spoken through words”.
418 Stephen: /.../ that’s right.
422 Stephen: If – how are love and madness interrelated here?
423 Nura: That you madlove.
424: [laughter]
426 Sara: Due to love.
427 Stephen: And then there is love.
428 Sara: He became – er, due to love, he went crazy. Then /.../
Initially, Nura elaborates on her interpretation of Ingrid (lines 381–387). She objects to how the others have interpreted her response, and clarifies that she also sees Ingrid as a loving, and not a constantly unhappy, person. Nura’s response is taken up by Sara, in a concise formulation of what she sees as the key themes of the novel (line 388): love and madness. Stephen wants her to elaborate on this (line 390), which she does in lines 391–393. Nura takes this up and expands on it (lines 394–396) by suggesting that Hede loves both Ingrid and Munkhyttan, and, further, that Ingrid is transformed through Hede’s love. Stephen asks her to elaborate on this specific response (line 397), which she does in line 417, by anchoring her interpretation in a quote (see McRae, 1996), where Hede’s love for Ingrid is described. Subsequently, Stephen asks for further elaboration on how love and madness are vital in the quote (line 422). In Nura’s response, she brings the two themes together (“madloves”, line 423). In the following, Stephen and Sara collaboratively elaborate on the causation (Langer, 1990) between love and madness in the novel. Sara first expands on Stephen’s response (line 426), and formulates her own response (lines 428–434), which she concludes with a metaphor on how love works in the novel (“a circle”). In lines 435–439, Stephen summarizes and affirms Sara’s interpretation, which she accepts as valid in the last lines of the excerpt. The dialogue is reciprocal (Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016), in that different readings are allowed and explored, and divergent understandings are considered. Hence, this excerpt also relates to the principles of literary reading as being indeterminate (Hall, 2015), and it is consistent with the idea that discussions of literature involve “hesitations, re-readings and re-thinkings” (Hall, 2015, p. 55). In excerpt 3, Stephen picks up on the students’ interpretations, asks them to expand on them, structures the conversation and affirms their responses to the novel.

Analyzing the genre of the saga through the interpretations of the images

In the final excerpt, number 3, the dialogue centers more specifically on the saga genre, which is prominent in the work of Lagerlöf (Karlsson, 2002), and the visual cues of the images, which symbolize the novel’s saga-like traits. How reality, sagas and “madness” relate to each other is one of the many complexities of the
novel. Stephen decides to address an episode in which Ingrid escapes hard reality through (day)dreaming, by showing an illustration (without written text, see Figure 2) of the saga-like world, and asks for verbal interpretations as resemiotization (Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3

674 Stephen: But now we have none. Right here we have no text. Now it’s ONLY images here.
675 Ana: That’s like, that’s like IMPORTANT, very important here.
676 Stephen: Yes.
677 Ana: That you shall grasp [inaudible] text, as here there are a lot of images, and there are no speech bubbles.
678 Stephen: No.
679 Ana: Or speech bubbles like that.
680 Stephen: That’s right.
681 Ana: But.
682 Nura: Thought.
683 Ana: Exactly. But there is one HERE. But THIS one doesn’t explain the rest of it. So you have to think, like you said.
684 Stephen: That’s right.
685 Ana: What does it mean, what do these movement things mean, er, what does Hede do here?
686 Stephen: And what, and what are these used for, THESE. /…/
694 Nura: It’s perhaps not in the text, but you can think for yourself.
695 Ana: Yes, you SHOULD think for yourself, you should, like, use your imagination.
696 Stephen: Mmm. That’s right.
697 Nura: In THAT way you can [inaudible] /…/
701 Stephen: Yes. Thanks, fine. I think – MY associations are also that this is also a bit SAGA LIKE, this.
702: [Several students] Yes.
703 Sara: I thought about that too.
704 Stephen: Well, [inaudible] she gets to a fairy tale castle here, or something. And that is how she talks about it later, too, that “It’s like a fairy tale castle I’ve come to”.
705 Nura: And that, that is also something that may be related to, that may be a motive. We talked about it last lesson.
706 Stephen: Mmm.
707 Nura: About how it, about how this book might be like a SAGA, might resemble, well, resemble a saga.
708 Sara: [inaudible]
709 Stephen: Mmm.
710 Nura: [inaudible] If we take Snow White, for example, that the girl, that she is rescued by a prince. Same thing then, as Ingrid. She is rescued by Hede.
711 Stephen: Mmm. Exactly.
712 Nura: So that [inaudible].
713 Stephen: That’s right. She is rescued by Hede, and then...
714 Sara: Then she rescued, it was the other way around.
715 Stephen: Then she rescues Hede. Exactly.
716: [inaudible]
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717 Stephen: It’s like a switch … composition, if you say so there. First she gets – it’s he who rescues her, then it’s she who rescues him in the end, then.

718 Sara: Well, I believe – I think that the book itself is not a saga, if you think about it. Well, the story itself.

719 Stephen: Oh?

720 Nura: No [inaudible], well, as a motif.

721 Sara: It was written in such a way that we should think that it’s a saga but really these are ordinary things that happen.

722 Stephen: Mmm.

723 Sara: She fantasizes, erm, she went mad, that also happens in real life, so it’s not like.

724 Ana: But when you say it like that it reminds me of The Emperor of Portugallia.

725 Sara: [laughter] Haven’t read it.

726 Ana: [laughter] I promise, no, no, you say like “But she’s imagining things. It was – It, Jan [the protagonist in The Emperor of Portugallia] too, same thing.

727 Sara: Mmm.

728 Ana: He did the same thing.

729 Stephen: Mmm.

730 Ana: He thinks he is the Emperor of Portugallia, ehr.

731 Stephen: Exactly.

732 Ana: Klarinn- er, what’s her name, er, Klara.

733 Stephen: Klara-Gulla.

734 Ana: Yes, exactly, she was the Empress.

In Excerpt 3, Stephen wants the students to interpret images only (line 674). As in the previous excerpts, he and the students expand on each other’s utterances via cumulative dialogue, building on each other’s responses and exploring divergent interpretations. In line 675, Ana initiates a jointly constructed interpretation of the images (lines 683–696), involving the importance of certain visual cues, such as “these movement things” (line 685, see Figure 2). In line 683, Ana also expresses her response to the absence of written text as “you have to think for yourself.” This interpretative and inferring stance is affirmed by Stephen (line 684), and elaborated upon by Nura (line 694), and then again by Ana (line 695). Notwithstanding these developed insights, Stephen still asks for further elaboration on the meaning of the images (line 686). In line 701, he delivers his own interpretation that the visual cues in the wavy lines signal a specific genre, thus introducing the saga motif, which he enhances in line 704. These lines may be seen to add to the expressivity of the image (Groensteen, 2007), possibly reinforcing Stephen’s interpretation. This interpretation prompts Nura to expand on heroines being rescued in sagas (lines 705, 707, 710), as well as to further Sara’s expansion on the traditional rescue theme of a saga by noting the inverted gender roles of Ingrid and Hede (line 714). Stephen contributes to these themes through elaborations (lines 713, 715, 717) and by summing up Hede and Ingrid’s mutual rescue as a “switch” in the novel’s composition. Sara introduces a new and partially contradicting response in an extension (line 718), that
this section of the story is not particularly saga-like, apart from the way it is told. Her point is that the theme of madness belongs just as much to the real world, which she elaborates in lines 718–723. Finally, yet another intertextual association is introduced (line 724), when Ana expands on Sara’s response by comparing the theme of madness and delusion in Selma Lagerlöf’s *The Emperor of Portugallia* with *A Tale of a Manor* (lines 724–736).

As in Excerpts 1 and 2, Stephen moderates the conversation through questions, and he asks the students to anchor their interpretations in written text and images (line 686), as a way of asking for a connection between “subjective standpoints” and “objective criteria” (McCrae, 1996, p. 37). Importantly, he participates in the collaborative interpretations by reformulating and affirming responses as valid and valuable (e.g. lines 680, 696, 711, 715, 717), thus bolstering the students’ confidence in their own responses (Hall, 2015). Notably, when introducing the saga motif in Excerpt 3, he underscores this interpretation as his own (701), implying that other interpretations are possible and that his – the teacher’s – response, “is not to be unduly privileged”
(Hall, 2015, p. 55). Excerpt 3 thus further exemplifies how a cumulative dialogue that is creative and non-repetitive can emerge from the collaborative meaning-making of images in a graphic novel and the visual cues they provide.

**Concluding discussion**

This in-depth analysis of a literary discussion provides a compelling case for how three language learners, together with their teacher, develop their responses to a complex graphic novel collectively, cumulatively and exploratively. With guidance by the teacher, the graphic novel’s written text, images and visual cues were interpreted and elaborated on in ways that indicated engagement in the overarching themes of love and exclusion, as well as the role of art and imagination in withstanding hardship. We find such human questions to be most suitable in the language learning classroom, hence avoiding themes connected to “migrant experiences” in simplistic and essentialist ways, through the choice of literature (Economou, 2015).

The reading of a graphic novel in the language learning classroom can be challenging, and it can also be used as an easier alternative to written text only (Chun, 2009). Our analyses show, however, how the graphic novel was read as a multifaceted and multimodal text in which images, design and texts were analyzed through dialogic interactions, in which the students were urged to verbally formulate interpretations and responses. Some of the interpretations were solely based on images, where we can see that the expressivity, as well as the synecdochic simplification (Groensteen, 2007) – which enhance certain key traits in the image – played a part in the students’ interpretations.

Importantly, these interactions were characterized by “an openness to the indeterminacy of literature” (Hall, 2015, p. 70), as many of the teacher’s questions and responses were aimed at several possible answers (see Rosenblatt, 1994). The dialogic interaction involved (re)formulations of responses, allowing for interpretations as well as new interpretations, thus forming advanced insights in line with cumulative dialogue. No student responses were rejected by teacher Stephen who, at the same time, did not seem to accept just any answer without further questions. Our analyses show the teacher’s critical role for opening up dialogue (see also Walldén, 2020, 2022), as the students were repeatedly asked to find support for their responses in the novel’s written text and images. Summaries, literary concepts and visual cues were also topicalized as a means of anchoring their interpretations in the text.

Furthermore, the teacher encouraged the students’ personal responses to the novel (Rosenblatt, 1994), allowing for hesitations, attempts and re-evaluations (Hall, 2015, p. 55) when elaborating on the protagonists, literary themes and the saga genre. The cumulative dialogue, where the students’ turn-taking entailed expanded and shared knowledge (Mercer, 2000, in Klingelhofer & Schleppegrell, 2016, p. 71), thus created space for the students’ responses, reflections and deepened engagement with the novel’s imaginary worlds. Concomitantly, the cumulative dialogue afforded potential
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space for language scaffolding, as part of the students’ negotiations of meanings. Also, the fact that the reading was well-prepared in the classroom formed part of the teacher’s language scaffolding. Although some of the responses related to fellow students, few responses connected to the students’ own lives beyond the novel’s story world which, inter alia, might be a corollary of the dialogue acting as an assessment of their readings.

These findings contribute extended knowledge about the dialogic potential in teacher-led literary discussions of graphic novels, showing how the students used visual cues and written text as resources for pursuing a focus on deeply human themes. The findings also show how dialogically-based literary work may support language learning students, without the risk, it would seem, of disrupting the students’ joy of reading, which might otherwise be the case using a more formalistic approach. We thus find that collaborative dialogue about a graphic novel holds potential for encouraging students’ literary reading in the language learning classroom while fostering confidence in their responses to literature. This may also be particularly true of more advanced language learners. As this book-group discussion formed part of more extended ethnographic fieldwork, it is also important to note that this dialogue reaped the benefits of long-term literary work in class, where the students had been afforded many opportunities to jointly read and discuss this graphic novel and other novels. In addition, the language teacher valued literary work highly (see also Granqvist, 2023). Such details are important when discussing a case study as an exemplary case. This paper’s focus on one examination suggests that other group discussions, as well as other parts of Stephen’s literature teaching, were not described in detail. Although this lack of a comprehensive perspective is a limitation, the close-up analysis of the dialogue about a graphic novel contributes important in-depth perspectives regarding the potential that cumulative dialogue holds for literature education among advanced language learners. Such findings are relevant to similar learning contexts, as well as being valuable to the research field of literature education in language learning classrooms. A possible focus for future research would be to more thoroughly delve into issues associated with reading in a second/additional language, including language comprehension. We also welcome further studies on teacher and student dialogue revolving around literature, such as graphic novels, among language learners in SSL or in other language learning classrooms in the Nordic context and beyond.

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References

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APPENDIX: original transcripts in Swedish

Excerpt 1.
268 Stephen: Vad tycker du- Tänk er som, om man tittar på den första bilden vi ser av honom [harklar sig] här, vad tänker ni om honom här?
269 Sara: Var?
270 Ana: Där.
272 Sara: Han är.
273 Nura: Han-
274 Sara: Alltså det finns så dära människor som man kan säga, alltså det finns människor som är inne i, till exempel konstnärer, dom som.
275 Stephen: Mmm.
276 Sara: är, alltså, dom som är, vad heter det nu, dom som är som till exempel hunge- dom är i sin- dom brukar vara i sin värld. Så dom lever sitt liv... Hans- han spelade fiolen som han gillade, han tänkte inte på nåt annat.
277 Stephen: Mmm.
278 Sara: Asså jag ser den här bilden som en viktig person, å samtidigt rastlös, som så här gör ingenting.
279 Stephen: Ja.
280 Sara: Mmm.
281 Stephen: Vad är orsakerna till att han inte gör nånting, då?
282 Ana: För att.
283 Nura: Han bara sitter å dricker kaffe å njuter av livet.
284 Ana: Aa ja.
285 Nura: Gör inget, har inget. Hade det varit en annan bild, typ så här, han kanske visas på en... När han till exempel eh, jobbar, håller i en spade.
286 Stephen: Just det.

Excerpt 2.
382 Stephen: Mmm.
384 Sara: Ja.
385 Nura: Jag menade inte att Ingrid var rädd, å ledsen.
387 Nura: genom hela boken, utan jag skulle komma till det.
388 Sara: (ohörbart) kärlek å galenskap, det är dom två teman som typ hela tiden det rör sig om.
389 Ana: Eftersom.
390 Stephen: Vad sa du nu, att.
391 Sara: Det gäller att ser man i själva boken, det är galenskap å kärleken, det är hela tiden asså så där nära varandra, det är dom två.
392 Stephen: Mmm.
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393 Sara: som är dom viktigaste, så det finns inte nåt annat.
394 Nura: Jag tycker också att, ja asså kärlek är den starkaste teman i den här,
förutom galenskap också.
395 Stephen: Mmm.
396 Nura: Men kärlek är mest då, aa, till exempel, Hede, och eller, går å
vandrar, för kärlek till sin stad, Munkhyttan. Ingrid, som också är en
annan, eh, person, som också kanske kan tolkas som en protagonist
i boken, eh... får brist på kärlek, men sen FÅR kärlek av Hede.
Så allt handlar mer om kärlek.
397 Stephen: Hur får hon kärlek av Hede?
398 Nura: Aa genom att-

[Diskussion om sidor]

417 Sara: att eh "Hede tyckte sig inte kunna säga henne hur han älskade
henne, det kunde inte sägas med ord".
418 Stephen: Just det.
419 Sara: Bara (ohörbart)
420 Stephen: Mmm.
421 (ohörbart)

422 Stephen: Om- Hur hänger kärleken å galenskapen ihop här?
423 Nura: Att man är galenkär.
424 [skratt]
426 Sara: på grund av kärleken.
427 Stephen: å så finns det kärleken.
427 Stephen: å så finns det kärleken.
428 Sara: blev han- eh på grund av kärleken blev han galen. Sen /.../

[hummanden]

432 Sara: På grund av kärleken fick eh han, asså han blev ju frisk igen
433 Stephen: Just det.
434 Sara: Så är ju [skratt] så är som cirkel
435 Stephen: Mmm. Det var en orsak till att han blev galen, och sen också blev
det.
436 Sara: ja.
437 Stephen: botemedlet, så att han blev frisk.
438 Sara: Ja.
439 Stephen: tack vare hennes kärlek kanske.
440 Sara: Exakt.
441 Stephen: Just det.

Excerpt 3:

674 Stephen: Men nu har vi ingen. Just här så har vi ingen text. Nu är det BARA
bilder här.
675 Ana: Det är väl, det är väl VIKTIG, väldigt viktigt här.
676 Stephen: Ja.
677 E2: att man ska ju fatta (ohörbart) text, eftersom här det ganska
jättemycket bilder, å det finns ingen bubbla text.
678 Stephen: Nej.
679 Ana: eller bubblarutor så här.
680 Stephen: Just det.
681 Ana: Men.
682 Nura: Tänke.

684 Stephen: Just det.

685 Ana: Vad betyder det, vad betyder dom härä rörelsegrejen, eh, vad gör Hede här?

686 Stephen: Å vad, å vad brukar dom härä, dom HÄR.

687 Ana: Som (ohörbart) typ.

688 Stephen: Aa.

689 Ana: Som, ja.

690 Stephen: Precis, precis.

691 Ana: Mmm.

692 Stephen: Mmm.

693 Sara: Fantasi.

694 Nura: Det kanske inte finns text där, men man kan ju tänka själv.

695 Ana: Ja man SKA ju tänka själv, man ska använda sin fantasi, typ.

696 Stephen: Mmm. Just det.

697 Nura: På SÅ sätt kan (ohörbart) .../


703 Sara: Jag tänkte också på det.

704 Stephen: Alltså (ohörbart) kommer hon till ett sagoslott här, eller nanting. Å det är så hon pratar om det sen, också, att ”Det här är som ett sagoslott, jag har kommit till”.

705 Nura: Å det där, det är också nanting som kan kopplas till, som kan vara ett motiv. Vi snackade förra lektionen.

706 Stephen: Mmm.

707 Nura: om att det, om att den här boken kan vara som en SAGA, kan vara lik, asså lik en saga.

708 Sara: (ohörbart)

709 Stephen: Mmm.

710 Nura: (ohörbart) om vi tar Snövit som exempel, att flickan, att hon räddas av en prins. Samma sak som då, Ingrid. Hon räddas av Hede.

711 Stephen: Mmm. Precis.

712 Nura: Så att (ohörbart)

713 Stephen: Just det. Hon blir räddad av Hede, å sen.

714 Sara: Sen hon räddade, det blev tvärtom.


716 (ohörbart)

717 Stephen: Det är liksom en, en växel (.) komposition, om man säger så där. Först blir hon- Det är han som räddar henne, sen är det hon som räddar honom i slutet, då

718 Sara: Asså jag tror- Jag tycker att själva boken är inte saga, om man tänker på det. Asså själva berättelsen.

719 Stephen: Aa?

720 Nura: Nej (ohörbart) alltså som motiv.

721 Sara: Det skriv- det skrevs på sånt där sätt så att VI ska tänka det är saga, men egentligen det är vanliga grejer som händer.

722 Stephen: Mmm.

723 Sara: Hon fantaseras, eh hon blev galen som händer också i verkligheten, så det är inte så.
Ana: Men när du säger det så där, det påminner mig också om Kejsaren av Portugallien.

Sara: [skratt] läste inte den.

Ana: [skratt] jag lovar, nej nej, du säger så här, ”Men hon inbillar sig” Det va- Det Jan också samma sak.

Sara: Mmm.

Ana: Han gjorde samma sak.

Stephen: Mmm.

Ana: Han trodde att han är Kejsaren av Portugalien, och eh.

Stephen: Precis.

Ana: Klarinn- eh vad heter hon, eh Klara.

Stephen: Klara-Gulla.

Ana: Ja, exakt, hon var ju Kejsarinne.