Whole-Class Discussions About Literary Texts: Engaging in Dialogue and Eliciting Literary Competence

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Abstract

This study examines literary discussions from Scandinavian lower secondary school classrooms, specifically the different ways in which teachers provide opportunities for students' development of literary competence. Moreover, it discloses what kinds of literary competence these teachers elicit and encourage. Three extended video-recorded discussions, in which a large number of students actively shared their understanding of literary texts, were selected and analysed qualitatively with regard to *the interaction* between teachers and students and *the content of the discussions*. It was found that teachers used both open-ended and closed questions to introduce new themes, and that their frequent use of follow-up questions promoted dialogicity. The teachers generally favoured one particular aspect of literary competence, yet several aspects of students' literary competence were visible in the discussions. For example, students were encouraged to pay attention to content, formal characteristics and contextual issues. Implications for teachers' literature instruction and for students' development of literary competence are discussed.

Keywords: *literature instruction; dialogic teaching; lower secondary school*

Introduction

At a time in which young people's interest in reading is decreasing, teachers' responsibility for raising students' interest in literature becomes all the more important. Teachers need to select interesting and inspiring literary texts, as well as provide opportunities for students to process these texts in relevant and productive ways. Blau (2003) describes reading as a social process completed in conversation and argues that discussing literary texts promotes students' development into competent, intellectually productive and autonomous readers of literature. When students and teachers participate in literary discussions and jointly develop their understanding of literary texts, the dynamics of talk and the content of the discussions are equally

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important (Alexander, 2008). This is why the present study takes two perspectives. It examines the interaction between teachers and students in three Scandinavian whole-class discussions about literature, and it investigates what these teachers and students talk about.

Teachers' organisation of classroom discourse affects students' learning; therefore, discussions should encourage students to figure things out and, thus, generate new knowledge (Nystrand et al., 1997). According to previous research, high-quality literary discussions are characterised by several features. Such discussions are structured and focussed, but the teacher does not dominate them. Instead, teachers use authentic questions and a high degree of uptake to encourage students to express their own ideas and opinions (Soter et al., 2008). To enable students to develop their understanding of literary texts, teachers need to pose genuine questions or problems. Furthermore, they should encourage their students to reflect on these problems and consider how to address them. Ideally, teachers should welcome experiences of confusion rather than presenting students with their own 'correct' answers (Blau, 2003). According to Rabinowitz and Bancroft (2014), it is important for teachers to give their students tools to communicate what they already know; communicating and discussing knowledge with others will help them grow.

When reading literature, readers must consider various perspectives and use their personal knowledge, imagination and previous experiences to interpret it. In this way, they create complex ever-changing internal text-worlds (*envisionments*) that include what the reader understands – and does not understand – at a particular point in time (Langer, 2011). Sharing ideas with peers may help students build envisionments (Langer, 2011). Hence, literary discussions provide opportunities for students to improve their understanding of texts and to expand their *literary competence* (Tengberg, 2011).

At school, students express different levels and kinds of literary competence, which is a challenge for teachers (Hennig, 2017). Furthermore, it is difficult for teachers to access students' literary competence, particularly because the way students respond to literary texts differs from the way in which they express their responses. Teachers need to notice aspects of literary competence that students already possess and help them to develop these aspects (Hennig, 2017). Nevertheless, teachers' interpretations of literary texts often seem to guide instruction. Teachers' responses and reactions to what students say about literary texts signal whether a response is acceptable or not. In this way, they indicate that it is possible to talk about correct and incorrect interpretations (Hetmar, 1996). Teachers may also accept students' initial interpretations of a literary text without asking them to justify or support them (Tengberg et al., 2022). Accordingly, depending on which approach the teacher chooses, the teacher or the students will control the interpretation of a text. However, during literary discussions, both parties can share this control (Hetmar, 1996).

Since discussions are an important means by which students can develop their understanding of literary texts (Wilkinson et al., 2015), more knowledge on what

characterises productive literary discussions is needed. This includes different ways in which teachers can promote dialogicity and encourage students to examine various aspects of literary texts. The present study aims to contribute such knowledge through guidance from the following research questions:

- How can teachers provide opportunities for students' development of literary competence in the context of literary discussions?
- What kinds of literary competence do teachers elicit and encourage?

Dialogic teaching

In whole-class discussions, the effectiveness of instructional discourse hinges on the quality of teacher-student interactions (Nystrand et al., 1997); therefore, the quality of classroom literary discussions depends on the extent to which students can participate actively in the discussions. Active participation can be achieved in different ways. According to Boyd and Markarian (2011), dialogic teaching is not necessarily marked by specific *forms* of discourse (e.g., the use of authentic questions, uptake and students' use of reasoning words) but rather by the *function* of utterances within classroom discourse. When discussing effective teacher talk, it is often expected that the function of talk can be determined by its form, for example, by the use of authentic questions. However, even when a question appears to be open-ended and dialogic, it might function in a monologic way, and in a dialogic classroom, closed questions can also contribute to extended discussions and elaboration among participants (Boyd & Markarian, 2011). According to Worley (2015), this confusion may depend on how questions function, semantically and syntactically. He explains that *grammatically*, questions can be open and closed. Simultaneously, they can be *conceptually* open or closed. Thus, what really matters is how the teacher's talk and intentions are perceived in a situated, social context, and the outward appearance of talk structures in a classroom does not necessarily reveal the underlying learning dynamic (Boyd & Markarian, 2011).

Alexander (2008, 2018) presents five principles of dialogic teaching that are important for teachers to consider when planning and conducting discussions, for example, in literature instruction. These principles can also be used as an analytical tool to understand the nature and complexity of literary discussions, as is the case in the present study. Three principles relate to the dynamics of talk and imply that the classroom is a site of joint learning and enquiry (*collective*), in which participants listen to each other, share thoughts and consider alternative ideas (*reciprocal*), and where they feel safe and comfortable enough to express ideas freely (*supportive*). Moreover, discussions need to be *purposeful*. The final principle, *cumulative*, implies that participants build on their own and others' ideas. It refers to the meaning of talk and, according to Alexander (2018), it is the most difficult principle for teachers to achieve.

Literary competence

Whole-class discussions about literature are a means by which teachers can promote students' development of literary competence. Culler (1993) describes literary competence as a set of conventions that is used when literary texts are read. These conventions differ across settings, and it can be assumed that aspects such as teacher training, curricula, textbooks and traditions impact how teachers treat literature, comprehend literary competence and teach it to students. Researchers investigating literature instruction in comparative studies have confirmed this assumption, for example, Torell (2002) found that Russian, Swedish, and Finnish teacher students used completely different strategies when interpreting previously unknown literary texts. More recently, Johansson (2015) observed that education-related aspects presumably impact how upper secondary school students respond to literary texts.

A literary text may elicit multiple interpretations, yet it cannot mean just anything (Culler, 1993); disagreements operate within a narrow range of possible meanings, especially since an interpretation should rely on some kind of evidence that can support it (Blau, 2003). Therefore, readers must pay attention to the author's clues about characters and motifs, then organise and interpret them. Readers' individual assumptions will necessarily form a basis for their interpretations, but aspects mentioned in the text should not be ignored, nor should ideas be introduced into the discourse that the text cannot justify (Rosenblatt, 2002); that is, interpretations need to rely on what is actually expressed in the text (Langer, 2011). Furthermore, readers' personal experiences, contextual knowledge and ability, and inclination to engage in knowledge construction impact on their understanding of literary texts (Blau, 2003; Hennig, 2017; Langer, 2011). Thus, literary competence is arguably multidimensional, and different aspects and dimensions within and beyond the literary text influence the reader's understanding and experience of it. When students learn how their peers have read a text, their own assumptions will be challenged, which may lead to altered and expanded understandings (Langer, 2011).

When students develop literary competence, the *literary text* is, in itself, a central component, and its content and formal characteristics are important. The ability to understand the content of a literary text partly corresponds to the notion of reading literacy in a general way, but also integrates genuine characteristics, for example, openness and ambiguity (cf., Frederking et al., 2012). Analysing formal characteristics (e.g., genre features and literary devices) and considering their aesthetic functions are other abilities related to the text itself. Furthermore, aspects *outside* the text are important (e.g., Hennig, 2017); readers mostly need some kind of contextual knowledge (e.g., about historical contexts, literary motives, epochs, and genres) to be able to interpret a literary text. According to my understanding, readers' personal experiences are part of their contextual knowledge.

When developing their understanding of a literary text, readers can use their contextual knowledge. Simultaneously, the literary text can contribute new knowledge,

for example, about history, other people's lives and genre features. Thus, readers' developed understanding of a text can be used to elaborate on their own knowledge and understanding (Langer, 2011), which implies that there is a two-way connection between the text and its context.

Literary discussions in Scandinavian countries

In a Scandinavian context, researchers have investigated literary discussions from various perspectives. However, Gourvennec and Sønneland (2023) noted that there have been considerably more studies in Sweden and Norway than in Denmark, and that researchers have more often investigated group discussions than whole-class discussions. These are the reasons why the present study will be a valuable contribution to the field, particularly since it has proven difficult for teachers to conduct whole-class discussions (Schmidl, 2008). Also when teachers intend to foster explorative discussions about literary texts, there is a risk that these may resemble interrogations, for example, if the questions teachers ask generate brief answers. Teachers often seem to dominate the classroom discourse and students might not develop their answers even if they are encouraged to do so (Schmidl, 2008).

Prior research has shown that teachers organise and comprehend literary discussions in different ways (Hultin, 2006), and that different forms of reading influence students' understanding of individual texts, as well as their ability to understand and experience literature at a more general level (Tengberg, 2011). Tengberg observed that discussions often focussed on the plot, but participants also approached the literary text in other ways, for example, when assessing and judging text from ethical or aesthetic perspectives, and when teachers encouraged students to relate personal experiences to the text. Hennig (2020) noted that when students could empathise with fictional characters, their interest and engagement fostered explorative discussions. However, when there is a strong focus on readers' subjective experiences of a literary text, it can be difficult for teachers to create interactive and dialogic discussions; Schmidl (2008) observed that discussions slowed down when students' subjective interpretations moved away from the literary content.

Nordic teachers often seem to make student-oriented choices when using literature in their instruction (Nissen et al., 2021), but Johansen (2015) pointed out that teachers need not use literary texts that their students easily understand. When sixth-grade students read a difficult text by Franz Kafka, they expressed considerable engagement when trying to interpret it. They were able to define the genre and discussed what the text might symbolise. Thus, they displayed literary competence (Johansen, 2015). In another study, Sønneland (2018) arranged discussions in which lower secondary school students were encouraged to examine difficult literary texts and found that these students drew attention to aspects that they did not understand and that they returned to the text to search for clues. Even discussions in which students appear to be off task may contain meaningful and creative responses to the

text (Skaftun & Sønneland, 2021), and also in playful situations that seem sponta-neous and silly, students may contribute with relevant comments beneficial to the interpretation of the text (Kvistad et al., 2021). As Rasmussen (2021) argued, stu-dents' engagement in literary texts, as well as how they negotiate relationships with each other and with their tasks, are of importance. Therefore, students need a shared understanding of the relevance and purpose of literary discussions.

Methods

This study examines literary discussions from three Scandinavian language arts classrooms. It is part of *Linking Instruction and Student Achievement*, a large-scale video study that captured naturally occurring instruction in the Nordic countries. The same design was used in all countries: two fixed cameras captured whole-class instruction and two microphones recorded audio. The teacher carried one micro-phone and the other microphone recorded student talk. In this way, it was possible to obtain good audio for the teacher's talk and reasonably good audio for the whole-class discourse.

All students participating in the study were in the first year of lower secondary school (13–14 years old). Before data collection began, all teachers, students and students' parents/guardians were informed about the research project, as well as about their rights as participants in it. Ethical consent guidelines were followed and informed consent was obtained in writing from participating teachers, students and students' parents/guardians.

In all classrooms, four consecutive lessons were recorded. The full sample – comprised of 38 Swedish, 46 Norwegian and nine Danish classrooms – included different kinds of instruction. Discussions about literature took place in 10 Swedish, 13 Norwegian and three Danish classrooms. These discussions varied in length and quality, and involved different kinds of literary competence. This study aims to pro-vide knowledge on how teachers can promote dialogicity and encourage students to examine various aspects of literary texts, so it was of key importance to sample discussions that included such practices, which they seldom did. Three discussions that shared a set of common characteristics were selected. These discussions were all extended (10 minutes or more) and involved analyses, comparisons and/or inter-pretations of literary texts. Moreover, a large number of students actively shared their understanding of the literary texts. Only whole-class discussions were included because it was necessary to follow teachers' questions and comments throughout the discussions.

The discussions were transcribed and thereafter analysed in two different ways. When analysing *the interaction* between teachers and students, Alexander's (2008) principles of dialogic teaching were important. These principles surfaced when I examined whether teachers' questions were grammatically or conceptually open or closed (Worley, 2015), how teachers followed up students' answers and whether they

encouraged students to elaborate on their own or other students' ideas. When analysing the *content of the discussions*, I investigated what kinds of literary competence teachers elicited and encouraged. In this process, I paid attention to aspects related to the literary text (content and formal characteristics), context (including personal and human experiences), and emotional experiences.

In the next section, I present my results. Excerpts and quotes from the discussions have been translated into English and adapted to make them more readable. The students' names are all pseudonyms.

Results

In the sampled discussions, students and their teachers talked about three different literary texts. There were also differences concerning what kinds of literary competence the discussions focussed on and how the teachers interacted with their students. However, at an overarching level, the discussions shared a set of common features. In presenting my results, I first highlight features that recurred throughout all three discussions. Thereafter, I present individual analyses of the discussions.

Similarities across discussions

Text selection is one thing that impacts literary discussions. In this study, all three teachers used literary texts with the potential to awaken young readers' interest: they all dealt with issues that the students found relevant to talk about. Moreover, all the teachers wanted their students to prepare before the whole-class discussions – either at home or in group discussions in class. In this way, the students had the opportunity to reflect on the literary text before sharing their understanding of it during whole-class instruction, which presumably made them more confident and willing to talk. Typically, the teachers guided the discussions, but they did not dominate them. Instead, they invited and made use of the individual student's literary competence. Since they asked several students to share alternative (and sometimes contradictory) ideas, the teachers encouraged multiple perspectives and signalled that reading and interpreting literature is not about finding simple answers.

The Hunger Games

The Swedish students read a section from Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games,* a dystopian novel. Before these students came to class, they read a few chapters and made some other preparations. At the beginning of the lesson, they sat in small groups and discussed the chapters they had just read. The group discussions laid the foundation for the whole-class discussion that I have analysed. During the whole-class discussion, each group was supposed to introduce a theme that they wanted to talk about. This practice indicates that the teacher trusted her students' ability to identify issues and aspects of the literary text that were relevant to discuss. Nevertheless, her own

role was important: during the group discussions, she engaged with the students and suggested what they should introduce during the whole-class discussion.

When analysing the content of this discussion, I found that it mainly concerned the plot, characters and reasons why the characters acted in certain ways. All groups brought up issues that they could not understand or figure out for themselves. Consequently, they introduced themes that were open in character. The answers that they sought were not expressed explicitly in the text, so they relied on hypotheses and clues that could be found in the text. The students seldom related to aspects outside and beyond the literary text (e.g., to personal and human experiences), but when one student said that they discussed whether Katniss and Peeta were in love, and explained that his group found it difficult to understand whether their feelings were true or not, the teacher summarised the discussion. She commented on how they talked about the kinds of feelings that everyone can recognise and that it can be difficult to decide whether you like or dislike something. In this way, she inferred that it is reasonable for readers to relate aspects from a literary text to their own lives and experiences.

In this discussion, the participants seldom referred to genre features. However, towards the end of the discussion, the teacher encouraged her students to predict what was going to happen in the last part of the novel. On this rare occasion, the discussion touched upon formal aspects of the text: Linus demonstrated that he knew how to read and understand literary texts (and movies) from this particular genre:

Teacher   I wonder what Linus thinks about the resolution of the book.
Linus   Eh, I have read and seen these kinds of movies and books quite a lot, and since it's about Katniss it is more or less obvious that she will win, I believe.
Teacher   Yes! You think that this novel will be a classic, following the typical genre end? That she will be the winner? You're not quite sure that Peeta will be one of the winners, but you count on Katniss?
Linus   That varies somewhat more. It depends. When I read, when I read some, a particular part, then I think that both… and then Peeta becomes sicker, and then I think it's more likely that only Katniss will win. It depends…
Teacher   Yes, so when you think of genre comparison, then you cannot really count on two winners. No, it's a nice connection that you make to this genre. Now it will be really exciting next Friday when we'll be able to compare.

This dialogue reveals that Linus and the teacher understood each other, and that the teacher valued the fact that he brought a new perspective into the discussion. However, during this part of the discussion, the teacher did not encourage students to follow up on each other's ideas. Therefore, the other students were not encouraged to display what they already knew about aspects related to genre features, nor to develop such knowledge.

How the teacher interacted with her students is pivotal, considering how the dialogue developed. Moreover, it helped her elicit students' literary competence.

Some methods and patterns recurred throughout the discussion, and I cite the first part of the dialogue below to illustrate this: when the teacher wanted the students to introduce a new theme, she typically asked an open-ended question to invite one of the groups to share whatever they had been talking about during the group discussion. First, the group's members related their own discussion:

Teacher	Hugo, was there something that you talked about somewhat more today that you thought about, or something that you were more curious about than other things?
Hugo	'Wonderings'.
Teacher	You wondered about a few things this week. Would you like to tell us about a 'wondering' that you had?
Hugo	About Rue, Tresh, or whatever his name was.
Boy	Tresh. [*Students from Hugo's group join in*].
Teacher	Yes, what did you wonder about Rue and Tresh?
Ella	When they came to this dinner, or whatever it was… [*Group members help her find the word she is looking for*] feast, to get their backpacks.
Teacher	Yes!
Ella	So, he was very angry when she, Clove, she mentioned Rue and asked if she was the one who killed her. He was very angry and we wondered what kind of connection he had to Rue, because it didn't matter if she was dead since he didn't know her, kind of.

When the teacher invited Hugo to tell the class what his group had discussed, he was seemingly free to introduce any topic. However, the group discussion and the teacher's suggestion about what they should discuss regulated his decision. Hugo's initial answer was very brief, which was why the teacher encouraged him to expand on it. His second answer was also short (and hesitant), so his peers volunteered to help him. They all confirmed that the name was, indeed, Tresh, and Ella contributed with a more elaborate answer. The interaction within the group suggests that all the group members felt that they were responsible for introducing their 'wonderings' in a clear way. Presumably, the teacher's instructional practices and the classroom climate encouraged this attitude.

Once the group revealed what they had been talking about, the teacher encouraged other students to join the discussion and introduce new perspectives. Initially, the teacher's questions were open, but now and then, she used closed questions. Occasionally, she shared her own ideas or reminded the students of details from the text. Overall, this implied that several perspectives were considered, helping the students examine the literary text:

Teacher	What do the rest of you say, in the other groups? Because in Hugo's group today they were very…, they thought it was a strange situation. They really wondered: why was he so upset when he heard that Clove had killed Rue? In this competition, people were expected to kill each other.
Stina	[*Incoherent*] That you say it like this, that everyone knows everybody. Perhaps they know each other and are each other's friends.

Teacher	Could this be the case? They came from the same district. Perhaps people living in District 11 are better friends.
Ella	They have agriculture, and then... perhaps they were in the field and exactly the same as...
Teacher	Perhaps they are accustomed to cooperation in District 11 and closer to each other, the players in District 11 than others. This might be the case. Is there anyone in the class who has considered this in another way? Why was Tresh so upset when he heard that Rue had been killed? Tresh hadn't been... He didn't seem to be upset earlier on in the story. Yes, go ahead, Amelia.
Amelia	Perhaps he was very cross when they said that... two people from the same district [*inaudible*] win together with her. Because she was little.
Teacher	Now, let's think. When in the story do we get to know that they have changed the rules? Was Rue killed before or after that?

During this part of the discussion, the teacher turned to the other students and used an open-ended question to encourage them to come up with ideas to explain Tresh's reaction. Simultaneously, she reminded them that the Hunger Games participants were expected to kill each other. Thus, she indicated that the students must consider this when presenting their hypotheses. When Stina suggested that they might be friends, the teacher rhetorically used a closed question to find out whether the other students agreed with her. In this way, she signalled that she (i.e., the teacher) was not the one who determined whether an answer was correct. Instead, she let the students draw their own conclusions. Moreover, the teacher brought additional information from the text into the discussion. So did Ella, whom the teacher interrupted. The teacher then summarised the first hypothesis and invited alternative perspectives. This time, Amelia presented a new hypothesis and reminded the other students of a new rule in the game. Although the information was correct, the teacher did not automatically accept Amelia's answer. Using a closed question, she encouraged the students to recall in what order different things occurred in the story. Linus, who knew the answer, voluntarily shared it with his peers. Thereafter, the discussion continued. New hypotheses were presented and, taking several perspectives into consideration, the students and their teacher co-constructed their understanding of Tresh's reaction. They did not reach any consensus. Instead, the discussion and how the teacher guided it revealed that the answer could not be found in the text.

Knife!

The Norwegian students read a short story, *Knife!* by Erna Osland, as part of their homework. They also analysed the text at home and tried to identify several building blocks and genre features in it. *Knife!* is about a girl who brings her father's knife to school to stop other children from bullying her.

The whole-class discussion about *Knife!* can be divided into three different parts that the teacher's questions initiated. Several students were involved and engaged in the discussion, and the teacher asked some of them to expand on and explain their

own ideas. However, she did not encourage the students to interact with each other. Thus, each student initiated a new perspective, which impacted the discussion's flow, rendering it somewhat incoherent. Moreover, the students did not get the opportunity to support each other's ideas, nor to challenge them when they did not agree.

In this discussion, the teacher used the literary text to teach the students about genre features and literary devices. Later, they would use this knowledge when writing their own narrative texts. To a very limited extent, the discussion concerned the content of the short story, but from details that the students mentioned, it can be inferred that the knife is important and that the main character is bullied. The teacher did not ask the students to summarise the plot, which suggests that she took it for granted that they all understood it. Furthermore, how she orchestrated the discussion indicates that she found other issues more important. In the first part of the discussion, the teacher used an open-ended question to invite students into the discussion, but her follow-up questions revealed what she wanted to discuss, which this excerpt illustrates:

Teacher	What was it like reading this text at home? This was an unknown text for you when you sat down to read it at home yesterday. How do you think it went? Adam?
Adam	Eh, it actually went quite well [...] you could interpret it in very many ways.
Teacher	Yes.
Adam	And it was pretty exciting.
Teacher	It was a little bit exciting.
Adam	… wanted to know what she was going to do with the knife.
Teacher	Did you notice what the author did to make it exciting?
Adam	A little like building it up.
Teacher	Yes, it's something with the building up. So, as a matter of fact, you don't get to know very much.

As can be seen here, the teacher's question encouraged the students to share their reading experiences. The question could be answered in various ways and Adam actually presented three alternative answers that were all reasonable. However, the teacher's follow-up question indicated that she wanted her students to pay attention to aspects that are useful to consider when writing narrative texts.

During this part of the discussion, several students shared their reactions to the text. They all introduced new perspectives. Sometimes, the teacher repeated their answers or commented on them. Less often, she asked clarifying questions. However, whenever she did this, her questions concerned aspects related to the writing of narrative texts. Thus, they revealed what the teacher wanted to achieve through her instruction: that her students improve their ability to write narrative texts. For example, the teacher asked one of the students how the author managed to write the short story in a way that made it impossible for her to stop reading. Moreover, when one of the boys commented on how the author mentions the knife multiple times, the teacher seized the opportunity to teach the students about repetition as a literary device.

In the final part of the discussion, when the teacher asked, 'What can you learn from this text in relation to your own writing?' it became even more evident what she wanted to achieve. When answering this question, the students hinted at aspects such as the dramaturgical curve and how it is possible to write a literary text without revealing too much information. They also mentioned issues related to the ending. Their answers were sometimes vague; therefore, the teacher interpreted their contributions. She then introduced and used literary concepts. Thus, students got the opportunity to expand their vocabulary, which could help them talk about literary texts.

On two occasions, the teacher acknowledged that it is possible to respond to a literary text emotionally, pointing out that readers often empathise with the main character, and she revealed that some texts have made her cry. When they discussed different kinds of endings, one of the boys (Isak) declared that he disliked open endings. In this situation, the teacher affirmed his feelings and noted that his reaction indicated that the literary text had had an impact on him.

Isak	I'm actually... I think it sucks when the story ends and I don't know what will happen next. I think it sucks. Then I have to stop and think after I've seen a movie. In a way that is good, but...
Teacher	It irritates you.
Isak	It irritates me.
Teacher	Yes, but then I think that the film, or the text, or the short story or the book, it's done something to you. Yes, and that's something good even if you'd rather want them to get each other in the end and that all would end well.

When Isak complained that he does not like open endings, the teacher suggested that books and movies with open endings irritate him, which he confirmed. To a large extent, his reactions were negative. Nevertheless, the teacher pointed out that this proves that some movies and literary texts have the potential to affect him, which is positive. These examples demonstrated that although the teacher primarily encouraged her students to focus on formal aspects related to the art of writing, she still signalled that readers' emotional responses to the literary text are valuable.

After the Party

The Danish students read *After the Party*, an SMS short story written by Renée Toft Simonsen. For two days, three fictional, but realistic, characters sent messages to their mobile phones. Quite naturally, the form of the text and the medium through which it was communicated impacted their reading experience. The text is based entirely on messages, so much is left for the reader to figure out. It reveals what happened to Mathilde the previous weekend: she kissed Lukas at a party. Now, 'a secret admirer' sends her insulting and offensive messages from an unknown number and claims that, from Lukas' perspective, this was a big mistake.

During the whole-class discussion, the teacher's questions introduced several different themes that, to a large extent, corresponded to what the students were

expected to discuss in small groups at the beginning of the lesson. Sometimes, the teacher accepted a single answer to a question, for example, when they all immediately agreed that the story took place in 'a realistic everyday environment.' On other occasions, issues were discussed in more depth, such as when they talked about the characters. When introducing this theme, the teacher asked a closed question with an expected answer; however, when the students suggested who this person was, she asked clarifying questions, which prompted them to justify their opinions:

Teacher	So, who is writing these messages?
Robin	A secret admirer.
Teacher	It's a secret admirer.
Kim	It's probably a girl who's jealous because Mathilde has something going on with Lukas.
Teacher	Yes, why do you say that it's a girl?
Kim	Because it's probably most likely. She's mad at Mathilde, right, instead of being mad at Lukas, because she had something…
Teacher	But couldn't it be someone who was in love with Mathilde? Torben?
Torben	So, we wrote that it was Lukas who was the 'unknown number' because Mathilde had written to 'unknown number' that Lukas was crazy about her, and then Lukas wrote that he's not crazy about her.
Teacher	Yes, so how does he know that she said that? Marie?
Marie	It's because Sigrid is 'unknown number.'
Teacher	Ok. Why do you say that?
Marie	It's because Sigrid kissed Lukas first and then she left, and then Lukas kissed Mathilde and then Sigrid got really mad, and then Mathilde told Sigrid about the kiss and that Lukas liked Mathilde, and then Sigrid told Lukas and then Lukas told Mathilde.

When answering the teacher's closed question, Robin suggested that 'a secret admirer' wrote the messages. The teacher repeated the answer, thereby confirming that this was the expected/correct answer. Kim interrupted and suggested that 'a secret admirer' was a girl, which prompted the teacher to ask a clarifying question. Moreover, she challenged Kim's interpretation and suggested that 'a secret admirer' could be someone who is in love with Mathilde.

The excerpt displays a common pattern in this discussion regarding the interaction between the teacher and the students: when the teacher introduced a new theme, she often posed a closed question. However, when the students replied, she typically encouraged them to clarify and expand on their ideas. The students' frequent use of the word 'because' when presenting their answers suggests that the teacher's use of clarifying questions had taught them to provide evidence for their ideas, either from the literary text or from their own experiences.

To be able to figure out the identity of 'a secret admirer,' the reader must rely on clues that the text reveals, as well as on personal experiences. When the teacher asked whether the way the text was written revealed if 'a secret admirer' was a boy or a girl, she indicated that it is not only important to pay attention to *what* is told, but also to *how* it is told. Based on an incident described in the text, one of the students said,

'We think that it is Sigrid […] that Sigrid first kissed Lukas and then Lukas kissed Mathilde.' Other students drew conclusions based on details from the text; for example, one of the boys explained that because clothes were frequently mentioned, he thought that 'a secret admirer' was a girl, and one of the girls said, 'I don't think a boy would write something like that about how she smelled and her body and stuff.'

The teacher encouraged the students to make connections to their own lives and personal experiences, but they denied that they had heard stories like this before. Nevertheless, their contributions to the discussion revealed their experiences, assumptions and prejudices, for example, when they talked about what girls and boys are like:

Teacher	Have you heard of anything like this before? I mean, in real life. That… Now I turn to Karen again. She said that girls do things like this. Do they? I don't say that you do. You don't have to sit and admit, 'Well, I've done that', but have you heard of it before? Maybe not necessarily here at school. [*Silence*] No? But you agree with Karen that girls do?
Student	Yes
Teacher	OK, but you've never heard of anything like this before?
Girl	Typically, girls do so.
Teacher	Why?
Girl	Girls are very bitchy.
Teacher	Girls are bitchy. OK. Why?
Student	More than boys.
Teacher	OK. Niels?
Niels	I mean, you see those movies where there's a girl who did something like that with someone, and then the ex-boyfriend gets a new girlfriend and then the girl becomes mega-bitchy. Then she does something like that or something.
Teacher	Yes, John?
John	Boys just say it.
Teacher	So, boys just say it? Would they say the things that were written in these text messages?

The teacher's closed question suggests that she expected an affirmative answer. However, the students were reluctant to share their experiences even though the teacher stressed that it could be something that they have just heard about. Still, their answers indicated that they had preconceptions about boys and girls, and how they act. According to these students, girls are very often mean and insulting. If they are jealous of other girls, they will write nasty things about them, but they will not say the same things to their face.

When the teacher asked whether boys would say the kinds of things that were written in the text messages, she implicitly referred to how 'unknown number' wrote in an offensive way, which most likely impacted Mathilde and her psychological well-being. However, the students did not respond to this. Thus, even though the students pointed out that the text was about 'cyberbullying' and argued that the theme was suitable for an SMS short story, they did not discuss what offensive messages can do

to the person who receives them. As for the teacher, she was more interested in the students' reading experiences than in discussing ethical issues. She asked, 'What do you think about receiving a short story in this way? Compared to if I had handed it out in print?' One of the girls asserted that she viewed herself as the main character but did not comment on the nasty messages.

The form of the text (and how the students received it) was important when the students talked about their reading experiences and, on one occasion, the teacher indicated that it is important to pay attention to genre features when reading literary texts. She asked whether the ending suited the genre and what kind of endings are most common in short stories. In this way, she took advantage of the discussion and taught her students about open endings. Accordingly, this teacher invited discussion about formal aspects of the text, as well as about the content of the short story and the students' experiences of it.

Discussion

This study examines three literary discussions and displays different ways in which teachers can provide opportunities for students' development of literary competence. Moreover, it discloses what kinds of literary competence these teachers elicit and encourage. The analysis indicated that the teachers used various methods to provide opportunities for students' development of literary competence. For example, students in all three classrooms were expected to prepare at home and/or in class at some level before whole-class discussions. Presumably, such preparation can help students feel more confident and, thus, more willing to share their personal understanding of literary texts. In a previous study, Hennig and Eriksen (2021) found that having whole-class discussions after group discussions was not as successful as they had expected. Often, students did not want to share what they had been talking about, or felt that they had already discussed the text in enough depth. However, once the Swedish and Danish students recounted important aspects of the group discussions, the teachers actively encouraged their peers to add to the discussion, which then evolved and expanded into something new and different. This demonstrates that combining group discussions and whole class discussions can be productive.

Developing a deeper understanding of a literary text is a process in which the reader's thoughts constantly change and expand. In this process, it is valuable to discuss the text with peers, and to listen to their thoughts and experiences (Langer, 2011). Accordingly, inviting all students into the discussion and encouraging them to contribute their individual understandings of a text are ways in which teachers can provide opportunities for students to develop literary competence. The present study reveals that this can be done in different ways: whereas the Swedish and Norwegian teachers posed open-ended questions to introduce new themes, the Danish teacher primarily asked closed questions. However, all three teachers used different kinds of follow-up questions to encourage their students to expand and explain their answers.

Furthermore, while the Norwegian teacher at all times asked students to develop and clarify their own ideas, the Swedish and Danish teachers also invited students to respond to each other's ideas. Thus, referring to Alexander's (2008, 2018) principles of dialogic teaching, all three discussions can be described as cumulative, but since the Swedish and Danish students were encouraged to contribute with new perspectives, their discussions were more collective than the one in the Norwegian classroom.

Boyd and Markarian (2011) argued that in dialogic teaching, the practical function of questions is more important than their grammatical form, and the examples cited from these discussions support this contention. The Danish teacher followed up her closed questions and insisted that students support their answers with arguments based on textual evidence or on their own experiences. Thus, rather than accepting specific answers, she used grammatically closed questions to open up the discussion. Her students very often used the word 'because' when explaining their answers, indicating that their teacher's use of follow-up questions had taught them to argue for their answers. The Norwegian teacher used questions that, based on their grammatical structure, appeared to be open. When answering these questions, her students often presented alternative answers. Subsequently, the teacher decided what she wanted to follow up on. She preferred to talk about aspects related to the writing of narrative texts (including genre features and literary devices), so the discussion most likely expanded students' literary competence in regard to these aspects. However, the teacher's (rather than the students') literary competence controlled the discussion.

In these three discussions, several aspects of students' literary competence were apparent, although some aspects were more prominent than others. The teachers' questions and contributions to the discussions indicated what kinds of literary competence they favoured: the Swedish discussion primarily focussed on the plot and characters, while formal aspects were emphasised in the Norwegian classroom. In the Danish discussion, the teacher and her students discussed the content of the text and related it to their own experiences. Moreover, they talked about the form of the SMS short story. In part, these findings correspond to what previous research about Scandinavian literature instruction has indicated. For example, Swedish teachers often seem to focus on aspects related to literary texts' content (Johansson, 2015; Tengberg, 2011), whereas genre discourse seems to dominate Norwegian lower secondary classrooms (Gabrielsen et al., 2019).

An important finding from the present study is that some teachers seem to favour one particular kind of literary competence, which regulates their instruction. Accordingly, it is critical for teachers to pay attention to how their own conscious or unconscious choices shape their literature instruction for this reason: the kinds of questions they ask and the kinds of literary competence they elicit and encourage impact students' development into competent and independent readers of literature.

Author biography

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