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# The Teaching of Literature

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*PRELIMINARY STUDY*

Language Policy Division, Strasbourg

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Intergovernmental Conference

*Languages of Schooling: towards a Framework for Europe*

Strasbourg 16-18 October 2006

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## Abstract

This study argues that the notion of "Bildung"<sup>1</sup> is especially important in the field of literary education. The concept has been broadened since the 1970s when developments in society, the sciences and the arts led to considerable change in the conception of language, literature and learning: since then, language and literature curricula have often come to include pragmatic texts and other media, and to focus on the learning reader and his/her development. Consequently criteria of text selection have not been restricted to the literary canon any longer. A major aim of dealing with literature in LE is to encourage students to read and to experience the encounter with literature as personally enriching. Additionally, the teaching often shows traces of literary studies and functions as propaedeutic especially in upper-secondary education. Sometimes this orientation can contradict the focus on the learner. With regard to competences, a much discussed issue is whether a separate area of competences can be defined for reading literature. This study argues that an integral approach which stresses the link between reading in a general sense and reading literature is especially helpful with learners. Education also needs to offer experiences with literature which allow for "literarische Bildung". One of the current educational challenges is to initiate processes of "Bildung" which are not limited to specific social milieus. Within a European context cross-cultural experiences might be encouraged.

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<sup>1</sup> „Bildung“ (in German) means developing and bringing out the full potential of a human being, based on his/her nature, but stimulated and structured by education (nurture). This dynamic concept encompasses the product or relative state reached by a human being as well as the process of becoming educated/becoming one's own self. During this process the mental, cultural and practical capacities as much as the personal and social competencies are being developed and continuously widened in a holistic way.

Particularly in the area of literary education, the focus on competences and their assessment has to be put in the context of a broader conception of the purposes of education.

## 1. Literature and Language(s) of School Education

Reading literature is generally included in the language curricula of both primary and secondary education. It is especially part of the Language(s) of School Education. Therefore this study mainly focuses on literature within LE. For foreign languages the issues to be raised are similar. A separate consideration of literature across the curriculum does not seem appropriate despite the fact that literature may sometimes serve as a source for dealing with specific problems in ethics, religious studies or history, especially with younger students. These phenomena seem rather isolated and are usually not formalised through curricula.

The way learning with literature is shaped within different educational systems is influenced by current concepts of education (“Bildung”), of culture, aesthetics and literature, of language and learning. Traditionally, the influence of literary studies on the literature curriculum has been strong. Since the LE Framework focuses on education in grades 1 to 10, the aim of this study is to focus on learning with literature from primary education on. It will become apparent that this implies a stronger focus on development and learning than a focus on the propaedeutical part of curricula – which often is at the core of didactics in literature. The study is biased in at least two ways:

- It is written by a German academic who has come to miss a systematic overview on literary education in Europe.
- It focuses on reading literary texts and the link between reading and reading literature. The link between literature and cultural experiences via other media is only hinted at and would be worth another study.

### 1.1 *Literary education and the notion of “literarische Bildung”*

“Bildung” remains a central notion within Europe. Though the term is used and discussed in different ways it has been recently pointed out that within modern societies a practical consensus can be identified. With regard to society, subjects are being prepared for citizenship in order to participate in public life. With regard to the subject, persons should acquire the necessary abilities to conduct and shape their lives as a learning process despite the uncertainties of work, career and social situation. In general, the purposes of “Bildung” shape the relationship between individuals and society in a normative way (see the German expertise on standards in education by Klieme et al. 2003, 51).

According to this consensus, “Bildung” in the field of literature (literary education) could be specified with regard to cultural life. The learning with literature should allow for personal development within a cultural context. Thus students should be introduced to the cultural life of society and they should be offered opportunities to participate.

In line with the practical consensus on “Bildung”, ‘participation in cultural life’ should offer a rather neutral concept when compared to a traditional notion such as ‘introduction to the national literary heritage’ via literary education: the traditional link between “Bildung”, the higher culture of the upper middle class and its canon has often been considered as problematic (cf. Klieme et al. 2003, 79; see Terry Eagleton’s distinction between culture and CULTURE; Eagleton 2000). In contrast to this connotation of “literarische Bildung”, “culture” is open to manifold concepts and

experiences of cultural life in the present time. To offer opportunities to participate then, should include all parts of society.

In many Western societies such a shift towards a conception of cultural life which is more open to the variety of culture(s) and social existence can be observed. This shows traces in current research on literary reading: Within the German discourse the use of terms such as *literary socialisation*, *reading socialisation* and *media socialisation* marks a change towards a descriptive perspective. The corresponding research analyses developments: "How does a subject become a member of society with regard to reading literature / to reading / to using media?" The active part of the individual in the process of socialisation is strongly stressed.

However, national curricula as well as a framework for LE have to go further in order to answer the questions 'What learners should learn in the field of literature?' 'What progression can and should be achieved?' 'What the content of literary education should be and which competences should be acquired?'

Klieme et al. hold that these questions – for all school subjects – can only be answered with regard to the central principles of the discipline / the subject. The standardised output educational systems aim at should reflect just these (Klieme et al. 2003, 18).

A consensus on these central principles in the field of literary education, though, is missing. On the contrary, research and teacher training at university and college show that present literary studies are highly diverse and cannot function as a correspondent to the (sub-) discipline literary education, particularly in the case of primary and early secondary education (secondary school from grade 10 to 12/13 often includes propaedeutics for academic studies).

Nonetheless, literary studies, linguistics and educational studies have shaped the contour of literary education.

### *1.2 Curriculum developments since the late 1970s and central purposes of literary education*

As part of the LE Curriculum the literature curriculum in many Western countries has undergone considerable changes, especially since the late 1970s. The turn towards pragmatics and a communicative conception of language has influenced the way of dealing with language in general. The influence of Critical Theory and the sociology of literature has led to major changes in literary studies and – with the usual delay – in institutional learning. The notion of literature as a specific form of text which can be distinguished from others ("pragmatic texts") has become problematic. The concentration on poetic texts of the cultural heritage was followed by a broader conception of text. Since then not only literary texts have been dealt with but also pragmatic texts and other media. It seems that Eastern European countries did not immediately take part in this development. However, a similar change can be observed in Poland since the 1990s (Awramiuk 2002).

The change did not only concern literature, the notion of canon and the criteria of text selection, but also the way literary understanding was conceptualised. A strong orientation towards the reader as the decisive function in the construction of meaning was brought about by the reception theory (Hans Robert Jauss; Wolfgang Iser; Umberto Eco). Empirical research offered insights into the reading procedures of empirical readers, their motifs and experiences of gratification. Some scholars in this tradition stressed the constructive function of the reader in such a way that the textual factor was not considered to be crucial (S. J. Schmidt).

At the same time a stronger focus on learning and the learner can be observed (cf. Ongstad 2006). In recent years research on socialisation with literature has pointed out that reading literature contributes significantly to general reading competences and that motivation to read is a decisive factor.

As a result of these developments ‘material’ and ‘formal’ conceptions of literary education have been criticised: “literarische Bildung” is neither just knowledge of literary tradition nor of literary genres and formal characteristics (cf. Waldmann, 1990). Instead the idea of “literarische Bildung” has been defined as knowledge about literary traditions, the adequate reception-competences and the ability to enjoy reading literature (cf. Rosebrock 2005). Thus, the notion of knowing how to read literature and how to benefit from it personally is stressed and distinguished from knowing about literature.

Consequently, curricula aim at introducing students to different genres and works, but also at developing a positive attitude towards reading and stimulating reading practices. This last point is stressed in all German curricula and forms a strong consensus within the diverse guidelines of the different states in the Federal Republic. Literature should be experienced as a resource of personal enrichment. This is also true for the Netherlands (especially grades 1 to 9). One of the outstanding tasks with regard to an LE Framework remains a comparison of the educational purposes of the different member states including the methodological approaches with regard to literary education.

### *1.3 Primary and secondary education: From learning with literature to learning about literature?*

The role of literature within language education changes considerably from primary to secondary and especially to upper secondary education. Whereas in primary and early secondary education reading literature is often integrated into other fields of language learning and education – learning to read, arts and ethics –, later on, in secondary school, literature may even develop the status of a discipline. Thus, in the Netherlands “Literature” is a distinct subject within Dutch and in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) it counted as a separate subject.

The more advanced the students are the more likely the teaching of literature is to show explicit traces of literary studies and to deal with the different academic approaches. At upper-secondary school level, “Literature” often serves as propaedeutics for literary studies at university. Literary studies in teacher education then have a noticeable influence on teaching (Rijlaarsdam/Janssen 2006; Goodwyn/Findlay 2002). It has been critically remarked that this approach already dominates in lower secondary and at the end of upper secondary school, with too little awareness of the learner at this stage (Goodwyn/Findlay 2002; Kämper-van den Boogaart 2005).

In general the shift corresponds to a dominant orientation towards the learner within the early school years and a stronger focus on the literary works and their ‘adequate’ reception in later grades.

In Germany the central purpose of reading literature within primary school is to introduce students to literary reading in such a way that they can enjoy it and develop regular reading habits. Experiences with literature are stressed and creative methods are often used. Knowledge about genres is already aimed at. This remains a stable feature in secondary school. From grade 8 onwards literary history and other contexts



of literature and its reception are introduced. This specific kind of knowledge is usually meant to support interpretation and should allow for flexible use and transfer.

A crucial question then is whether 'adequate' reception is defined with regard to the literary work, with regard to the learner or with regard to both text and learner (Kämper-van den Boogaart 2005).

#### *1.4 Canon and criteria of text selection*

The idea of canon is usually applied to or discussed with relation to secondary school. In line with the broader conception of "Bildung" and culture (see 1.1) an orientation towards canon has been criticised. Researchers point out that the theme 'canon' has been replaced by 'the problem of canon' (Korte 2002): instead of following an explicit canon criteria which reflect the learning process and its purposes should control text selection. Facing the dynamics of Western societies a canon of the national literary heritage often seems not only inappropriate, but exclusive. A stable framework which could legitimise such a canon is considered to be missing. Within cultural studies research on canon has become a prominent field. Jan Assmann pointed out that cultural memory is secured by the canon. Tendencies of canonisation can offer a response to instability in a society (Assmann 1997).

Despite the critique of canon it has also been acknowledged that in Western contexts canonical literary education still contributes to the cultural capital of individuals (Bourdieu).

Therefore, although the idea of canon has been discussed critically since the 1970s, in Western countries a tendency towards canon can frequently be observed. Thus the National Curriculum in Britain stresses the "English Literary Heritage" (Goodwyn/Findlay; 2002). Moreover, canon is reintroduced where central assessments are taking place. The German "Zentralabitur" effectively controls which texts are read, at least in upper secondary school.

In general it is to be expected that criteria of text selection will at least partly result in the reading of canonical texts, since the introduction to genres and to literary history will rely on exemplary texts.

In primary education typical genres can be identified and an implicit canon of well-used literary works on a national or even international level should be expected. The main genres in the case of Germany are folk literature, children's poems and children's literature in general. Here international children's literature makes up a surprisingly high proportion. Often the reading of a literary work with younger students takes place in a framework of achieving world knowledge via reading or of ethical education (such as dealing with conflicts in the classroom or friendship). Three central purposes of reading literature for the young can be distinguished: an opportunity to tackle a specific theme (friendship, family, adventure...); an introduction to the specifics of literature and literary reading; enhancing the motivation to read (cf. Rosebrock 1997). These purposes also serve as criteria for the selection of texts.

For secondary education the genres become more elaborate (novel; tragedy; lyrical genres) and knowledge about literature, literary history, economic, philosophical and social contexts is often drawn in. Canonical world literature is also often represented. Where orientation towards the learner is stressed it is to be expected that text selection will be more influenced by considerations of students' development and interests. Thus, thematic approaches might serve as organisational principles (e.g.: conceptions of love through literary history) and literature for adolescents might be read. Also, the students might take part in the choice of books.

In many European states literature which can represent the multi-cultural structure of society (e.g. migrant literature) has been introduced (e.g. Germany; the Netherlands).

On the whole, educational systems differ in the amount of freedom teachers have in shaping literary education. In the Netherlands and in Germany, the selection of texts and also the methodological approaches are largely dependant on teachers' choices. The situation in Britain is likely to be very different due to the National Curriculum.

### *1.5 Reading literature, reading literacy and competences*

Dealing with literature means reading texts. The proportion of literature within the reading curriculum probably varies considerably. Especially since the 1970s pragmatic texts and other media have been introduced into the mother-tongue classroom.

One of the reasons why many countries aim at encouraging students to read literature and develop stable habits of reading in their spare time is the conviction that this contributes to reading literacy. Extensive fictional reading should lead to the automatisisation of word recognition but also to textual knowledge on a general scale.

However, it has been pointed out that policies which focus on encouraging students to read and on offering positive experiences with books might fail to develop reading literacy, especially with pupils from backgrounds where reading is not part of the family life-style. If teaching does not explicitly train the reading abilities, the presupposition of such a policy is not fulfilled: reading and reading literature can continue to be hard work and the expectation that one should enjoy reading does not match the experience of the students (Pieper et al. 2004).

The teaching of a reading curriculum has therefore attracted increasing attention in Germany, especially since PISA.

In the context of reading instruction literary texts offer possibilities for developing language awareness: "It is literature that encapsulates language in its most subtle and intricate forms where nuances of meaning and ambiguity have to be embraced." (Fleming 2006). The elaborate use of language often demands close reading: special effort is needed to construct meaning on the level of local and global coherence as well as on the level of integrating prior knowledge since many literary texts show unexpected turns. The use of literary texts for the purpose of reading instruction, then, could at least offer an encounter with literature, especially for those students who have not experienced literature as part of their cultural life, but have "learnt" that it forms part of a specific kind of "Bildung" alien to them.

It could then be argued that an integrated view of language and literature is more adequate or to be preferred (cf. Fleming 2006).

The – much-debated – question of the specifics of literary reading must also be considered.

Empirical literary studies have often stressed that readers adopt a specific attitude towards literary texts and that this attitude controls the reading process. As a result, the crucial factor seems to be the reader rather than the text. In this case, a specific reading literacy cannot be argued for with regard to textual features but would have also and primarily to take into account a wide range of personal variables.

However, evidence from the PISA survey suggests a different view. This international survey focused on reading literacy with regard to reading tasks in modern societies. The models used were based on reading research of cognitive psychology, which usually concentrates on reading pragmatic texts. However, PISA aimed at testing reading literacy in a broad sense and thus included both continuous and discontinuous

texts. In the first group a few narrative texts were included. Artelt/Schlagmüller (2004) analysed the PISA-data on the various text types and point to empirical evidence that the reading of literary texts forms a separate dimension of reading literacy. When describing the quality of this dimension they stress first and foremost that conceptions of the tasks literary texts put to readers depend on the idea of literature which is applied. However, some structural features can be considered as characteristic in the given cultural context and these were apparently influential in the case of PISA: stylistic features with which the readers do not identify, rhetorical figures such as metaphor, symbol and allegory (Artelt/Schlagmüller 2004, 177/78). It is interesting to note that in only four countries students did better with literary texts than with others (Russia, Brazil, Portugal and Hungary). Germany, which traditionally stresses reading literature, achieved better results with other text types.

The structural features pointed out by Artelt/Schlagmüller correspond in part with systematic dimensions such as the understanding of fictionality and polyvalence. Although they also appear in pragmatic texts, and thus are not exclusive for literature, their frequent appearance should lead to the reading of a text as literary.

Research on children's literature has stressed that traditional literary norms are strongly present in this genre. Taking up structuralist models of text, Maria Lypp points out that equivalence and variation are central features (cf. Maria Lypp 2000).

Current discussions concern further features which are at least more prominent with literary reading. Sometimes motivational aspects and the ability to communicate about texts are included (Rosebrock 2005) as research on reading socialisation has shown the importance of offering communicative settings for reading.

More recent models of reading literacy have also focussed on the construction of situational models which seem especially relevant to literature: among others, the imaginative aspect of literary reading can be described. A competent reader constructs an adequate model with regard to plot, figures, space and motif.

In general, one major difficulty is the clear distinction of specific aspects and their scaling. How could progression in interpreting literary texts be described in terms of a model of competences? What might a scale for understanding polyvalence or realising a text as fictional look like?

In Germany, curricular progression is implicitly linked to growing knowledge about genres and formal aspects and abilities to contextualise literary texts because of growing knowledge about literature and its cultural history. Thus, knowledge should accumulate and should be used in a flexible manner so that interpretation becomes more adequate with regard to the text. Following this route, aspects of literary studies come in later in secondary education and competences can be defined in relation to different approaches. Concepts of competences might well be biased according to the theoretical paradigm preferred (cf. Fleming 2006).

This conception offers little or no insight into the cognitive development of competences in reading literature and reflects experiences and customs in teaching literature to a large extent. Especially with younger students it seems necessary to be aware of the fact that an adequate interpretation of the text should be adequate to the potentials of the learners, too. There is evidence that young learners can deal with literature that clearly follows genre rules, but struggle with innovative aesthetic writing.

A new survey which assessed competences in English and German in German-speaking countries made use of the situational model and its dimensions in order to offer scales (DESI).

The theoretical framework and the instruments have not yet been published but some advancement can be expected. The DESI-survey again makes use of a general model for reading literacy. Possible routes of how they can be applied to reading literature are developed by Willenberg (Willenberg 2006).

### *1.6 Reading literature, assessment and "literarische Bildung"*

While literacy models have been developed for general reading that offer scales and can assess levels and progression this is not the case with regard to the specifics of literary reading. Text comprehension with regard to literary texts is often assessed with general text-comprehension tasks. Attempts have been made to assess the imaginative construction of meaning, the understanding of isolated features such as metaphor, of narrative structures or of genre specifics (see Fleming 2006 for examples of possible competence statements). Although developments in literature and media have the result that genres are more and more intermingled and that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is less strictly to be drawn, for assessment-tasks it nevertheless seems more appropriate to rely on exemplary texts where students can make use of the acquired knowledge and skills.

For many texts 'adequate' interpretation in a philological sense is only possible by integrating relevant context knowledge which would then have to be offered. Especially in the field of literature broad experiences with reading are most helpful. Whether these can always be offered within institutional education should at least be doubted. Thus, assessment can either make use of literary texts which presuppose little with regard to backgrounds of the kind, or offer the specific knowledge necessary, or construct "adequate" interpretation in such a way that such knowledge is not required. This is especially true in the case of internationally comparable assessments since a unified literature curriculum is not to be expected.

It is especially in the field of literature that tension between general aims of education and an orientation towards assessments becomes obvious. Dominant approaches are especially alien to the notion of testing. "Literarische Bildung" cannot be cut down to students' output with regard to specific reading tasks.

## 2. The teaching of foreign-language literature

With regard to literary reading in the foreign language classroom, basically the same questions have to be raised as with the teaching of literature in the mother tongue. The purposes of literary education are similar, although a certain stress on language learning is to be expected. Literature is considered as an authentic medium for introducing students to the specific language and culture. Sensible text choices offer opportunities for personal response, an approach which has been strengthened, so that the proportion of authentic literature within the language lesson has increased over the last 20 years. With regard to an LE Framework, the potential of literary reading across the languages to compare traditions and gain insights into various cultural forms and developments should be stressed (cf. Lazar 1993).

## 3. Outlook: Literature in an LE Framework

The ongoing debate on reading curricula, reading competences and reading literature has so far supported the realisation that institutional learning must create learning environments which allow for good performances and progress regardless of the student's social and cultural background. With regard to literature, it has to be acknowledged that cultural practices experienced within socialisation are highly

influential. An approach which integrates literature into the reading curriculum will allow for encounters with literature. In order to allow for literary education in its specific sense a double route could be taken: institutional learning should develop reading literacy so that students are capable of reading literary texts among others. It should besides offer opportunities of participating in cultural life and of experiencing literature as personally relevant. It should thus balance canonical and learner-oriented approaches. Thus, the potential of “literarische Bildung” could be realized. An LE Framework should also pay special attention to reading literature within the languages of education and the foreign languages. Here, cross-cultural perspectives can be developed which can help to avoid bias with regard to social milieus and mono-cultural perspectives. The limits of assessing competences should be acknowledged. Literature within an LE Framework should then contribute to integration and social cohesion.

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<sup>2</sup> Paper presented at the Conference organised by the Council of Europe and Jagiellonian University ‚Towards a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages of School Education?‘. Kraków, Poland, April 27-29, 2006. (see [www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang) [Events])

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