What Makes Reading Literary Texts Pleasurable and Educationally Significant?

Abstract. The dominant model of foreign language teaching and learning is based on a narrow functional approach. The severe drawback of this model is that it provides no relevant content for worthwhile discussions and no motivation to read, speak and write in the foreign language. Literary texts present relevant content in such a way that reading, speaking and writing about them is pleasurable and educationally significant. Yet this is only true with a concept of literature which does not regard literary texts as self-referential objects that have nothing to do with the world of the reader. In my contribution I develop a concept of literature as dramatization which involves the readers cognitively and emotionally and encourages them to evaluate the world of the text and relate it to their own. Hence understanding literary texts is relevant to the readers’ self-understanding. In part 1, I outline the basic features of such a model. In part 2, I examine the concept of interpretation. It is educationally significant because we have to interpret situations constantly in the private and public sphere. In part 3, I discuss the relationship between affirmative and critical readings and argue that we need both in order to realize the aesthetic and educational potential of literary texts. In part 4, I discuss sense-making strategies which indicate that reading literary texts is an interactive process demanding the reader’s cooperation and participation. In part 5, I redefine literary competence in order to include the aspects which make reading literary texts pleasurable and educationally significant. In part 6, I refer to the young adult novel *Gracey* by the Australian author James Moloney and make some suggestions for teaching it.

0. Introduction

Should we read literary texts in the foreign language classroom? The affirmative answer to this question is highly contested. In Great Britain after the Second World War, when foreign language learning became obligatory for all students, as Michael BYRAM and Veronica ESARTE-SARRIES point out, a new justification for foreign language learning was needed. It could no longer be defended with the argument that the foreign language would enable students to read great literary and non-literary texts of the foreign culture. A practical and instrumental reason had to be found. Fortunately, after the Second World War, because of economic growth, a large part of the population in Great Britain could afford to travel abroad. This situation provided a new justification for foreign language learning: It should prepare students for their future role as tourists and enable them to survive linguistically in the foreign culture. BYRAM and ESARTE-SARRIES speak of learning a “language for survival” (cf. BYRAM/ESARTE-SARRIES 1991). It is obvious that...
this instrumental justification of learning a foreign language renders literary texts irrelevant. Tourists will rarely have to discuss literature in the foreign language.

In post-war Germany we had a similar development. Traditional foreign language learning was criticized because it enabled students to read Shakespeare but not to order a meal in a restaurant. The functional and instrumental approach to foreign language teaching and learning was experienced as liberation, but it also led to a trivialization of its contents and ignored essential educational goals inherently connected with foreign language learning. But this approach also failed to live up to its own expectation. It could not increase the students’ motivation for foreign language learning because promising students that their learning will be useful five or six years later is not enough; learning a new language must be motivating and responsive to their present needs and interests in the classroom.

Yet why could the attack of the functional approach on literary texts be so successful? One answer is that the teaching of literature (Literaturdidaktik) was based on formalism, which was ill prepared to justify reading literary texts in the foreign language classroom. Formalism stressed that literary texts have nothing to do with the world outside the text because they are self-referential. The matter of how literary texts affect their readers was banished as ‘affective fallacy’. Only naïve readers, it was argued, are emotionally involved in reading literary texts. The educated reader, however, studies the stylistic and structural features of literary texts for their own sake. This concept of literature, as indicated, was ill prepared for defending the significance of literature against the narrow functional approach to foreign language learning.

Today we are experiencing a similar emphasis on instrumental foreign language learning. Two official publications underscore this development: The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages published by the COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2001) and Zur Entwicklung nationaler Bildungsstandards published by the BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR BILDUNG UND FORSCHUNG (2003). The authors of The Common European Framework stress that language learning should not be separated from general educational goals such as tolerance and intercultural understanding, but when we look at the descriptors of the various levels of foreign language learning we see, as Werner DELANOY (2007) points out, that the framework is only interested in linguistic skills. It is true that its authors write that their neglect of literary texts is not meant to signal that they do not appreciate them (cf. COUNCIL OF EUROPE 2000: 56), but it is clear that literary texts cannot play an important role within the presuppositions of the framework. This is also valid for the Bildungsstandards, which are skill and output oriented: “Der Output wird somit zum entscheidenden Bezugspunkt für die Beurteilung des Schulsystems und für Maßnahmen zur Verbesserung und Weiterentwicklung” (BMBF 2003: 9). The fact that Bildung is a dialogical and interactive process which is distorted if it is standardized and reduced to objectively tested results is completely ignored.

Yet today the teaching of literature (Literaturdidaktik) is better prepared to criticize the functional and instrumental approach to foreign language for two reasons. One is that formalism has been criticized within literary studies; the other reason is that we have a new concept of teaching literature. Its main task is no longer to transmit to students
knowledge acquired by literary studies but to explore how readers respond to literary texts and how their cognitive, affective, and evaluative competences are activated in reading them and in speaking and writing about their reading experiences. In his illuminating book *Becoming a Reader. The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood*, J. A. Appleyard points out that the academic approach is interested in “how a poem works internally as a certain kind of linguistic structure” (Appleyard 1990: 188) and makes clear that we have to go beyond this academic approach in order to explore what makes reading literary texts educationally significant:

What falls through the cracks here [= the academic approach] is the reader’s sense of connection between his or her personal and emotional involvement with the work and the stance the work takes towards the world of ideas and their history, the debates about what men and women should or should not believe or value. (Ibid.: 117)

The teaching of literature has to highlight the readers’ personal and emotional involvement with the text and how they relate the world of the literary text to their own. In his book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner makes a similar point: If we want to understand the educational significance of literature, we must go beyond its characterization “in terms of its structure, its historical context, its linguistic form, its genre, its multiple levels of meaning and the rest” and must ask the question “how and in what ways the text affects the reader and, indeed what makes great stories reverberate with such liveliness in our ordinary mundane minds. What gives great fiction its power? What in the text and what in the reader?” (Bruner 1990: 4). In my contribution I want to give answers to these questions. In the first part, I shall outline a model that can explain why reading literary texts is pleasurable and educationally significant. In the following parts (2 to 4) I shall explore some further aspects of this model. In the fifth part I shall attempt a new definition of literary competence in a broader educational context. In the last part I shall leave the abstract level and refer to the young adult novel *Gracey* by the Australian author James Moloney.

1. **Dramatization: A Model of Reading Literary Texts**

1.1 **The Reader as Spectator**

In order to understand what is characteristic of art, the philosopher Richard Shusterman analyses the term ‘dramatization’. The English word ‘to dramatize’ and the German word ‘dramatisieren’ contain two different aspects which are essential for understanding art in general and literature in particular. One aspect of dramatization means “to put something on the stage”, “to take some event or story and put it in the frame of a theatrical performance or the form of a play or scenario” (Shusterman 2002: 233). Dramatization implies that something is taken out of its ordinary context so that we as spectators can watch it, respond to it and comment on it. This puts spectators in a special situation in which they can respond freely because they are relieved of certain constraints of everyday life: Shusterman says about the spectator’s experience: “Because art’s experience is
framed in a realm alleged to be apart from the wearisome stakes of what we call real life, we feel much more free and secure in giving ourselves up to the most intense and vital feelings” (ibid.: 237). In a similar way Martha NUSSBAUM describes the advantages of being a spectator: “Since the story is not ours we do not find ourselves caught up in the ‘vulgar heat’ of our personal jealousies or our angers or in the sometimes blinding violence of our loves” (NUSSBAUM 1990: 48). This aspect is often ignored when we read literary texts in the classroom. We do not consider that something is put on the stage so that we as readers are encouraged to give ourselves up to the most intense and vital feelings. Rather we give the impression that the students should objectively register what they read. This has far reaching consequences for the teaching of literature. From the beginning we have to take into consideration that literary texts dramatize events in order to involve their readers. This becomes even clearer when we consider the second aspect of dramatization.

1.2 Dramatization: Exploring Reality and Responding to it

Among the entries under ‘dramatize’ in the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary SHUSTERMAN finds as a second entry: To dramatize is “to treat something as, or make it seem, more exciting or important.” In the Duden Fremdwörterbuch he finds: “dramatisieren bedeutet, etwas lebhafter, aufregender darstellen, als es ist” (cf. SHUSTERMAN 2002: 234). This explains why reading literature is pleasurable. In his book Mimesis as Make-Believe the philosopher Kendall WALTON asks why Lauren, a small girl who knows the fairy tale “Jack and the Beanstalk” by heart, wants to hear it again and again, and gives the following answer: “Lauren, listening to ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ for the umpteenth time, long after she has memorized it word for word, may feel much the same excitement when the Giant discovers Jack and goes after him, the same gripping suspense that she felt when she first heard the story” (WALTON 1993: 260).

Yet we do not only identify with characters and feel with them. We also learn to reflect on how we are involved and what the literary text makes us do. There is a self-reflexive or meta-cognitive element in reading literary texts. This aspect has been highlighted by Louise M. ROSENBLATT. She introduces the distinction between two ways of reading: efferent and aesthetic reading. Efferent reading means that we read for information. Without the need for this information we would not read the text. Aesthetic reading, however, means that we do the reading because we enjoy it. Here it makes sense to speak of reading literary texts for their own sake. ROSENBLATT gives the following description of aesthetic reading:

In the aesthetic transaction, the reader’s selective attention is focused on what he is living through during the reading event. He is attending both to what the verbal signs designate and to the qualitative overtones of the ideas, feelings, images, situations, characters that he is working out under the guidance of the text. (ROSENBLATT 1981: 21f)

It is important for the teaching of literature that we encourage students to direct their attention to the question of how the literary text affects them. This includes that they
relate the world of the literary text to their own. With reference to Marcel PROUST, NUSSBAUM points out that we read literary texts in order to understand ourselves:

In this way, the reader or spectator of a literary work is reading and watching the world, but at the same time reading the world, and reading her own self. The work is, in that sense, as Proust puts it, an ‘optical instrument’ through which the reader may focus on certain personal realities. (NUSSBAUM 2006: 243)

Such a concept of literature raises two crucial questions. The first one runs: How should we conceive of the relationship between the world of the literary text and that of our own? Do we interpret the literary text first and subsequently apply what we have found out about it to our own world? Hans-Georg GADAMER argues that such a belief would ignore that we bring our prior knowledge and prior experiences to the text and that we are already involved in understanding it. It would further ignore that a literary text addresses us and calls upon us to respond. Hence application is part of the interpretation. It is the misleading concept of objectivism that makes us assume that we as detached observers interpret a literary text first and apply the acquired knowledge for our subjective purposes later (cf. GADAMER 1990: 307 ff). Now to the second question: How can we find out whether the literary text as ‘an optical instrument’ does not distort our world but illuminates it? In the last part of my contribution, I will show how the novel Gracey explores the tensions between Aboriginals and white people in Australia. How can we decide whether this presentation is distorting or illuminating? Some students in my classes would suggest that we must study the social and political reality in Australia before we can answer this question. But this would imply at best that literary texts could only confirm what we already know. Yet they do not copy reality but dramatize it and reveal something new which we could not know without them. Does this imply that we have to accept the revelations uncritically? GADAMER uses the concept of recognition in order to evaluate what the text reveals. But what does it mean? We misunderstand it, he writes,

if we only regard it as knowing something again that we know already – i.e., what is familiar is recognized again. The joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing more than is already familiar.

In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. (ibid.: 114)

ARISTOTLE formulates a similar insight: Poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history because it presents events and actions in such a way that they reveal something basic about human nature and our way of being in the world (cf. ARISTOTLE 2001: 29 f.). For NUSSBAUM, the words “more philosophical than history” mean that literary texts do not present what has happened but acquaint us with what might happen (cf. NUSSBAUM 1998: 92). And she points out that such a knowledge is educationally significant because it cultivates “capacities of judgment and sensitivity” (ibid.: 86). Two and a half thousand years later, the novelist Milan KUNDERA writes that literary texts do not copy reality but explore human possibilities:

A historian tells us about events that have taken place. By contrast, Raskolnikov’s crime never saw the light of day. A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has oc-
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Criticizing formalist conceptions of literature, KUNDERA stresses that the presentation of human possibilities raises a claim to knowledge: “A novel that does not discover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral. Knowledge is the novel’s only morality” (ibid.: 51). RICŒUR taking up ARISTOTLE’s concept of mimesis points out that mimesis “far from producing a weakened image of pre-existing things, […] brings about an augmentation of meaning in the field of action, which is its privileged field” (RICŒUR 1991: 138). GADAMER expresses a similar insight: The representation of a thing in art is more than the thing represented: “Homer’s Achilles is more than the original” (GADAMER 1990: 114). If we apply this insight to the novel Gracey, we realize that we cannot answer the question whether the novel is distorting or illuminating by finding out whether or not it confirms our knowledge about the social and political reality in Australia. The protagonist Gracey is not the weakened image of a real person but presents a highly significant human possibility of being in the world. She has been created in order to reveal what a young Aborigine who lives between two cultures experiences. As SHUSTERMAN points out, literature as dramatization engages us in understanding a highly significant reality:

Art’s fictions are therefore often said to feel far more vividly real than much of what we commonly take as real life. It is as if the bracketed diversion of art from ordinary realities allows us an indirect route to appreciate the real far more fully and profoundly by putting us in touch with a reality that is at least greater in its experiential depths of vivid feeling. (SHUSTERMAN 2002: 237)

The writers I have quoted make clear that we misunderstand literary texts if we regard them as the confirmation of what we already know on the one hand or regard them as precious objects whose stylistic and structural features we admire in a detached stance on the other hand. ARISTOTLE’s definition of tragedy makes convincingly clear that we can only understand tragedies adequately if we respond to them and feel fear and pity. These feelings presuppose another capacity, namely empathy. We can only feel fear and pity if we are capable of putting ourselves into the characters’ place. Hence empathy is an essential part of the aesthetic experience. In her book Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar NAFISI writes about empathy: “If you don’t enter the world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won’t be able to empathize, and empathy is at the heart of the novel” (NAFISI 2003: 111). Such an insight forces us not only to reconsider literary competence that is based on a formalistic concept of literature but also makes us aware of the weakness of the narrow pragmatic approach to foreign language teaching and learning. This approach dismisses literary texts as irrelevant without considering how important they could be for understanding people who are different. For NUSSBAUM, it is an essential educational goal “to cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but sharing many problems and possibilities with us” (ibid. 85). If we accept such a goal, literary texts become important because they give an insight into what people feel and think which we can rarely gain in everyday life: “Narrative art has the power to make
us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest – with involvement and sympathetic understanding” (NUSSBAUM 1998: 88).

In this first part, I have outlined a concept of literature as dramatization that can explain why reading literary texts in the foreign language class can be pleasurable and educationally significant. They present relevant content in such a way that students are motivated to read, speak and write about them. In the following parts I examine some further implications of this concept of literature.

2. The Tensions between Understanding and Interpretation

From a theoretical point of view we can say that all understanding is interpretation, but from a practical and pedagogical point of view it is necessary to distinguish between the two, although there are no clear-cut boundaries between them. Understanding means that we grasp things more or less automatically without conscious effort. For example, when we hear something in our mother tongue, we do not first hear the sounds and then attribute meanings to them but understand them immediately. When we are uncertain what the sounds mean, we begin to interpret them. We experience this kind of uncertainty in many ordinary and extraordinary contexts. Hence we need interpretative competence, and literary texts are well suited for developing it.

According to SHUSTERMAN interpretation is an activity which “enlarges, validates, or corrects understanding” (SHUSTERMAN 2000: 131). It comes into play when we feel dissatisfied “with the understanding we already have – feeling it partial, obscure, shallow, fragmented or simply dull – and we want to make it fuller or more adequate” (ibid.: 132). This implies that interpretations are answers to our experiences of uncertainties which we can understand and which satisfy us. If this were not the case, we would ask for a further interpretation of the interpretation and would be involved in a vicious circle \textit{ad infinitum}. This indicates that the distinction between interpretation and understanding is a significant one. We ask for interpretations in order to correct our “partial, obscure, shallow, fragmented or simply dull” understanding.

During the process of interpretation we become aware of alternative interpretations which we have to consider and to evaluate. To a large extent, culture consists of such discussions about alternative interpretations in different spheres. Hence interpretive competence should play an essential role in education (\textit{Bildung}) because it enables us to participate in public as well as in private life. In interpreting the novel \textit{Gracey} I will highlight how this competence encourages students to develop different interpretations and to evaluate them.

3. Affirmative and Critical Reading of Literary Texts

Postmodern concepts of reading often stress that students should no longer be the servants but the masters of the text and project into it whatever they want to see in it. Reading
literary texts is not longer seen as an interaction but as an expression of self-creation, self-determination, and autonomy. RORTY ridicules the ‘weak’ reader who attempts to understand the intended meaning of a text and praises the ‘strong’ reader who imposes his concepts and interests on the text (cf. BREDELLA / BURWITZ-MELZER 2004: 130 f). However, this post-modern devaluation of the text in order to strengthen the significance of the reader is problematic. It is true literary texts do not have a fixed meaning but this does not mean that they have no meaning at all and that readers alone decide about their meanings (BREDELLA 2002: 36 ff). Literary texts could not challenge our views if we as readers were only to project our views into them. According to the Danish philosopher Knud LØGSTRUP literary texts are significant because they convince us of a certain world view which we have to accept or reject (cf. LØGSTRUP 1998: 73, 88). Here, we can take up the discussion of the question in part 1.2 regarding whether literary texts can raise a claim to knowledge or whether they are mere self-referential works of art which cannot comment and interpret the world outside the text. According to the literary scholar Wayne BOOTH, we should regard the literary text as a good friend who wants to persuade us of a certain world view. NUSSBAUM takes up the metaphor of the text as friend and points out:

The question now is, what does this friendship do to my mind? What does this new friend ask me to notice, to desire, to care about? How does he or she invite me to view my fellow human beings? Some novels, he [BOOTH] argues, promote a cheap cynicism about human beings and lead us to see our fellow human beings with disdain. (NUSSBAUM 1998: 100)

Thus we must read literary texts critically but the critical reading presupposes an affirmative one. Without understanding what the texts says, there is no dialogue in which we can learn something new.

With reference to Eliot and Adorno, SHUSTERMAN says about affirmative reading: “For unless we provisionally surrender ourselves to the world of the artwork, we shall be unable to get deeply involved in the work and thus fail to understand it fully enough to appreciate the power of the alternative vision” (SHUSTERMAN 2002: 156). The reader, in Adorno’s words “must enter into the work” and “give himself over to the work” (quoted in ibid.). According to John DEWEY, who strongly influenced ROSENBLATT’s concept of aesthetic reading, the reception of a work of art is an interactive process in which we are changed: “For in order to perceive esthetically, he [the perceiver] must remake his past experiences so that they can enter integrally into a new pattern. He cannot dismiss his past experiences nor can he dwell among them as they have been in the past” (DEWEY 1958: 138). Reading is a dialogical process, which includes affirmative and critical reading. This insight is often forgotten in new concepts of teaching literature which no longer take the literary text seriously but only use it as a springboard for creative tasks. I do not argue against creative tasks but want to stress that reading literary texts is only pleasurable and educationally significant if it makes us see things in a new light and this presupposes that we attempt to understand the text. Otherwise we do not allow it to challenge our views. Hence teaching literature demands affirmative reading. What this means I will discuss in the next part.
4. Sense-Making Strategies

Most of the tasks which test reading competence are right-or-wrong questions. These tasks convey the impression that reading means to register as many details as possible and that good readers are able to remember most of them. This concept of reading seems so convincing because it is supported by another one: If we get the details right, we can build up a reliable understanding of the text. Yet there is something basically wrong with this concept of reading because our understanding of the text does not begin with details but with the knowledge of what kind of text we are reading and what the text is about. Details only make sense in a larger whole. Hence understanding a text is based on the hermeneutic circle.

a) The hermeneutic circle: It stresses the necessity of pre-understanding and the mutual interdependence between details and the whole. This is often neglected in teaching reading. The misleading concept of the text as container from which we pick bits of information lets us forget that we must bring an enormous amount of our prior knowledge and our prior experiences and our sense-making strategies to the text. The hermeneutic circle between the details and the whole makes aware of another central aspect in reading literary texts, and this aspect will become clearer when we consider reading as a performative act.

b) Performatism: Reading as a performative act becomes obvious when we watch actors on the stage. But ordinary readers, too, perform. Jean-Paul SARTRE calls reading “guided creation” (création dirigée), which implies that readers bring their prior knowledge to the text and put their emotions at the text’s disposal under the guidance of the text. When we feel the hatred of one character for another, it is our hatred which is aroused in us by the words of the text (SARTRE 1964: 29). DEWEY writes: “Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art” (DEWEY 1958: 54; cf. BREDELLA 2002: 170 ff). In a similar way Michail BAKHTIN points out that we must become active:

So long as we simply see and hear something, we do not yet apprehend artistic form; one must make what is seen or heard or pronounced an expression of one’s own active, axiological relationship, one must enter as creator into what is seen, heard and pronounced. (BAKHTIN 1990: 305)

Aesthetic reading is much more than enjoying formal structures; and it is pleasurable because it makes us active in the way SARTRE, DEWEY and BAKHTIN describe the performative act of reading. Often we do not encourage students to interact with the text but rather encourage them to collect information about the text.

Wolfgang ISER, who thoroughly analyzes the reading process, points out that there are gaps in a literary text which the reader must fill and bridge in order to understand it. The reader must supplement what the text left unsaid. SHUSTERMAN, discussing performatism, comes to the conclusion: “According to some versions of performativism, an artwork is a schematic object with various ‘gaps’ of indeterminacy that are filled in by interpretation” (SHUSTERMAN 2002: 41). And he quotes Margold Macdonald: “the task of the critic resembles those of the actor and executant rather than those of the scientist and logician” (quoted in ibid.: 41). The text is a kind of score which needs the reader as performer.
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If it is the task of teaching literature to make reading as a performative act possible, it has consequences for our concept of the exemplary reader. In his book *The Literature Workshop. Teaching Texts and Their Readers*, which I highly appreciate, Sheridan BLAU writes that the exemplary reader should be the English professor who rejoices when he is confronted with difficulties in texts because he can examine them and write books about them (cf. BLAU 2003: 22). I agree with BLAU when he writes that we should educate students to be able to deal with reading difficulties, but at the same time I would like to stress that the exemplary reader for students should not be the English professor. As long as *Literaturdidaktik* is understood as *Vermittlungswissenschaft* and transmits the knowledge of literary studies to students, the exemplary reader is necessarily the English professor who analyses the literary text as an object and celebrates reading difficulties which allow him to demonstrate his knowledge and interpretative abilities. When, however, we ask what makes reading literary texts pleasurable and educationally significant for students, we no longer regard the literary text as an object but direct our attention to the interaction between literary texts and their readers and ask with APPELYARD and BRUNER how literary texts reverberate with such liveliness in the readers’ mind and how their aesthetic and educational potential can be realized in the classroom. We examine how the students as readers are involved in making sense of the literary text and how they relate its world to their own. Hence we must consider literary competence in a wider aesthetic and educational context.

5. Reconsidering Literary Competence

Taking up what I have said in the preceding parts I attempt to list some aspects of literary competence which I regard as relevant:

a) We read literary texts because they offer us models for understanding a foreign world as well as our own one. They help us to make sense of our lives and provide us with the vocabulary to speak and write about them. The American philosopher Alasdair MACINTYRE stresses this point emphatically when he writes: “Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and in their words” (MACINTYRE 1981: 216). NUSSBAUM, as we have seen in part 1.2, uses Proust’s term ‘optical instrument’ in order to indicate that readers use the world of the literary text to illuminate their own. We read literary texts because we hope that finding out how others live will help us find out how we should live. This is an essential aspect of literary competence which is necessary for promoting reading motivation.

b) Reading literary texts promotes interpretive competence which makes an understanding less “partial, obscure, shallow, fragmented or simply dull” and enables us to compare and evaluate different interpretations. It is also necessary for being able to participate in a dialogue with others (for the significance of the dialogical competence for foreign language teaching and learning, cf. DELANOY 2000: 2006). The interpretive competence which can be effectively developed with literary texts is needed in many ordinary and extraordinary situations outside of literature.
c) It is an essential part of literary competence that students put their knowledge about actions and their feelings at the text’s disposal and that they are to respond to the world of the literary texts. Reading is a performative act or in SARTRE’s words ‘guided creation’. If students do not realize this dimension of literary competence they will not experience pleasure in reading literary texts.

d) We have seen that for ROSENBLATT aesthetic reading means that the reader is focusing on “what he is living through during the reading event”. It is part of literary competence that we pay attention to how the text makes us respond. When we ask students to write about their reading experiences, we promote the competence to make explicit what is implicitly involved in the reading process. In his book The Explicit Animal. A Defense of Human Consciousness Raymond TALLIS argues that the characteristic feature of human beings is to make explicit what determines them implicitly and thus allows them to gain a distance to these influences (for a more detailed discussion of the pre-knowledge about human actions and values BREDELLA 2007: 73 ff).

f) Reading literary texts promotes the development of a common vocabulary. If one reader calls a character courageous, whereas another calls him a coward, they both will not only have to clarify how they understand the text but what these terms mean for them. K. A. APPIAH asks why we read stories and care how we think and feel about them and answers: “[E]valuating stories together is one of the central human ways of learning to align our responses to the world. And that alignment of responses is, in turn, one of the ways we maintain the social fabric, the texture of our relationships” (cf. APPIAH 2006: 29). I will refer to this competence in interpreting the novel Gracey.

g) Literary texts develop a competence for evaluating complex ethical conflicts. In his comprehensive study Ästhetische Erfahrung und Moral Marcus DÜWELL (2000) shows how literature is morally significant not so much because it prescribes how we should act but because it explores ethical conflicts from different perspectives and opens up new horizons for evaluating them (for the relationship between ethics and aesthetics cf. BREDELLA / BURWITZ-MELZER 2004: 44 ff and the interpretation of Gracey in part 6).

h) Story competence is needed to understand one’s own identity and those of others. According to MACINTYRE, I am part of the stories of others, “as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives” (MACINTYRE 1981: 218). If I ask “What am I to do?” I must answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?” (ibid.: 216). For Vera and Ansgar NÜNNING (2007), understanding and telling stories are essential for developing identities.

j) Literary competence promotes intercultural competence. According to Martha NUSBAUM, literary texts encourage their readers to put themselves into the position of others so that they can experience what these others think and feel:

It is for that reason that literature is so urgently important for the citizen, as an expansion of sympathies that real life cannot cultivate sufficiently. It is the political promise of literature that it can transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities but also profound differences between the life and thought of that other and myself and making them comprehensible, or at least more nearly comprehensible. (NUSBAUM 1998: 111)
In a similar way Richard RORTY writes:

Seen in this light, what novels do for us is to let us know how people quite unlike ourselves think of themselves, how they contrive to put actions that appall us in a good light, how they give their lives meaning. The problem of how to live our own lives then becomes a problem of how to balance our needs against theirs, and their self-description against ours. To have a more educated, developed and sophisticated moral outlook is to be able to grasp more of these needs and to understand more of these self-descriptions. (RORTY 2003: 9)

In reading literary texts we are constantly confronted with the question of balancing the inner perspective (how do the characters see themselves?) and the outer perspective (how do we as readers evaluate them?).

i) It is an essential aspect of literary competence that the students are able to identify stylistic and structural features of certain genres. Without such knowledge we could not understand how literary texts work and could not speak and write about them. I have attempted to outline a broader concept of literary competence in order to explain why reading literature is pleasurable and educationally significant. In this attempt I am not alone. Eva BURWITZ-MELZER (2007) and Werner DELANOY (2007) have described similar aspects of literary competence and have indicated how they can be realized in the foreign language classroom. Literary texts have the advantage that they present complex dramatized events the students can explore and speak and write about. In the last part of my contribution I shall examine some of the dramatized events in the young adult novel *Gracey* and indicate what can be achieved in the foreign language classroom.

6. James Moloney: *Gracey*

*Gracey* is the second novel in a trilogy which includes *Dougy* and *Angela*. In *Gracey* we have three personal narrators: Gracey, an Aboriginal girl, who won the hundred-yard championship of Queensland in Australia and is offered a grant at a prestigious college where she will be the only Aboriginal student among whites. The second narrator is her brother Dougy, who is slightly retarded and loves his sister, who is the most important person in his life. The third narrator is a white policeman in the Aboriginal community. What he thinks and feels, he records on his father’s tape recorder since he cannot reach him on the phone personally. This narrative device indicates that he is extremely lonely and isolated in the Aboriginal community. Besides these three narrators there are the voices of many other Aboriginals and white characters so that the reader is faced with many perspectives. Only a literary text can bring so many voices and tensions between Aboriginals and white Australians within one text into the classroom, and these voices and tensions are dramatized in such a way that they not only illuminate something about the social and cultural reality in Australia but also about the world of the reader.

At the beginning of the novel *Gracey* is faced with the problem of whether or not she should accept the grant from the white college. The Aboriginal activists are against it and accuse her of betraying her Aboriginal culture if she accepts the grant. But her mother questions the belief that there is an Aboriginal identity which can be betrayed. For her, it
is important that attending the college will enable her daughter to get a job and escape poverty. In order to engage students, one could ask them what they think Gracey should do and what they think Gracey will experience at the white school. In answering these questions the students have to take the foreign situation into consideration and must activate their prior knowledge about such things as betrayal, identity, discrimination and integration. They will look at these concepts from different perspectives. These activities will enrich their vocabulary and will help them understand their own reality. Understanding the foreign world has repercussions for understanding one’s own.

A central event in the novel is the discovery of six skeletons with bullet holes in their skulls in the Aboriginal community. Even the national newspapers report about it and interpret it in different ways. If these skeletons are those of white people, the discovery implies that white people were killed while “civilizing the continent”. If they are those of Aboriginals, it will be a further proof of the brutalities of the whites who sought to exterminate the Aboriginals. Here the students can experience the significance of interpretation in everyday life and in politics. Gracey studies history books in order to find out what happened in the community when these six people were killed. During her studies she makes a discovery which changes her concept of integration and identity. The history books treat Aboriginals not as human beings but as obstacles to progress. She is so shocked that she leaves the school and returns to her community in order to fight for identity politics. In the Aboriginal community, however, she must learn that the activist Kevin O’Shean does not appreciate her commitment to the Aboriginal community because she as a woman should not be engaged in public affairs. When Gracey learns who killed the six Aboriginals and that the situation was more complicated than they thought, she tells Kevin what she knows. Yet he changes her story in order to make it more effective in attacking whites. Gracey severely criticizes his distorted story. He, however, argues that white people are always guilty even if they are not personally involved. They are guilty for being in Australia. How do we as readers respond to Kevin’s view? He does not regard white people as fellow human beings. In this respect he resembles the historians who regard Aboriginals as objects to progress and do not accept them as fellow human beings (for a comprehensive interpretation of Gracey and further tasks cf. BREDELLA / BURWITZ-MELZER 2004: 172 ff).

Let us imagine that one student says that Gracey betrayed her culture when she decided to attend the white college. This student does not only say something about Gracey but also expresses how he or she feels about her decision and implies how other students should feel about it. Another student might think that Gracey is courageous and an exemplary figure, however, because she takes her life in her own hands and allows neither the majority culture nor the minority culture to prescribe how she should think and feel. This student might further point out that people should not be accused of betraying their culture when they develop a new identity. Such an example makes clear that reading literary texts brings our own concepts into play and helps to builds up a common vocabulary.

Summarizing, we can say that literary texts are relevant for foreign language learning and intercultural understanding because they can bring so many voices of the foreign
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culture into the classroom. They encourage us to put ourselves into the shoes of others and see the world through their eyes. In APPIAH’s words, literary texts “link us, powerfully to others, even strange others” (APPIAH 2005: 257). They encourage us to understand their self-descriptions and to learn something from them for our own self-descriptions in the complex process of affirmative and critical readings and comparisons of different interpretations. This process cannot be standardized, but it can be assessed if we succeed in giving a detailed description of literary competence which allows us to evaluate what students achieve in reading literary texts and in speaking and writing about their reading experiences and their interpretations (cf. BURWITZ-MELZER 2007).

References

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