“It was Difficult. And a Little bit Boring.” Swedish Middle School Students’ Reception of Narrative Texts

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To cite this article: Maritha Johansson (2022): “It was Difficult. And a Little bit Boring.” Swedish Middle School Students’ Reception of Narrative Texts, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: 10.1080/00313831.2022.2042848

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2022.2042848

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Published online: 25 Feb 2022.

Article views: 164

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ABSTRACT
This study explores literature reading and reception of narrative texts among Swedish middle school students. Through a written assignment and a think-aloud protocol, students’ comprehension and interpretation of narrative texts are investigated. The study shows that Swedish middle school students tend to focus mainly on the plot. The main comprehension hindrance is at the lexical level, but cultural aspects, such as general knowledge of the surrounding world, are also crucial. The students also tend to have difficulties interpreting the gaps in the text and making meaning from the implicit. However, the students are also capable of interpretations and conclusions that go beyond the text. The study suggests that literature teaching in middle school should strive to activate both syntagmatic and paradigmatic thinking [Bruner, J. (1986). Actual minds, possible words. Harvard University Press] to help students to a better comprehension of the literary text, but that the syntagmatic reading should be emphasised to encourage the joy of reading.

Introduction
Reading is one of the most important skills in a text-based society, where it is more or less impossible to participate fully without a good level of reading comprehension. Reading different kinds of texts is an important part of the L1 subject in most countries. Sweden is no exception. At all levels of the school system, Swedish syllabi underscore the importance of reading – fiction as well as other types of texts. However, previous research (Johansson, 2015; Williams et al., 2014) has shown that students, at both lower and upper secondary school levels, tend to have difficulties understanding texts of a certain complexity, especially narrative structures, and perspective. They also tend to make interpretations related to their own daily life, instead of turning to the literary text itself to develop a more profound understanding (Johansson, 2015; Tengberg, 2011). In the present study, the focus is on responses to narrative texts in middle school, i.e., students aged 10–12.

Middle school students’ reading skills vary, from those who have just “cracked the code” to independent and skilful readers. It is during this period that some children become so-called bookworms, while others more or less give up on reading fiction. Literary texts also compete, both at and outside school, with other types of texts, including digitalised texts and various types of social media. However, literature education during this period has the potential to develop both students’ reading skills and their reading interest. It is not always desirable that readers at this stage perform complicated literary analysis, but they need to gain at least a basic knowledge of what characterises the literary text, which can help them to a better understanding.
This study investigates Swedish middle school students’ responses to short stories to deepen knowledge about how they understand and interpret narrative texts. The aim of the study is to contribute a deeper understanding of middle school students’ reception of a narrative text. The research questions investigated in this reception study are:

- What do the students mainly focus on when reading a narrative text?
- How do middle school students demonstrate their meaning-making related to the structures of a narrative text?
- What purpose do interpretation of gaps in the text serve for the reception of the text?

Knowledge on this is important for the text choices made in the classroom, as well as for the teacher’s choices of adequate tools to deal with the texts. It is important to gain knowledge about how reading fiction in school affects young students’ reading and reception of narrative texts.

**Background and Previous Research**

Reading in middle school is a complex issue and the middle school reader is not very easy to describe, as shown by Lars-Göran Malmgren as early as 1997. He concludes that readers in middle school develop in relation to three different areas: social conventions, cultural identity, and ideologies. Middle school students of today are supposed to develop their reading skills in connection with both fictional and non-fictional texts, and at the same time develop an independent and mature literacy competence (Applebee et al., 2003). The students in the present study are formed within the Swedish school system, where the aim of working with literary texts is expressed as follows in the syllabus for compulsory school:

> [...] students should meet and acquire knowledge about literature from different periods and different parts of the world. [...] When encountering different types of texts, performing arts and other aesthetic narratives, students should be given the preconditions to develop their language, their own identity and their understanding of the surrounding world. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 262)

That the students should develop “their language, their own identity and their understanding of the surrounding world”, implies that literature education in compulsory school is oriented towards a personal rather than analytical approach to literary texts. In grades 4–6 the students shall work with reading strategies to understand and interpret texts, they shall meet texts from different time periods and literary genres, and they shall learn about text structures (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 265). Literature education should thus help students develop at least a basic knowledge of narrative texts and their structures, alongside personal growth through reading fiction. In addition, Swedish syllabus for the school subject Swedish underpins that language development is one of the main goals (cf. Gourvennec et al., 2020). There is an underlying assumption that reading literary texts can help improve reading skills, while at the same time contributing to the individual’s ethical, aesthetic, and democratic development.

Within Nordic research, there is a tradition of exploring reader oriented (Bommarco, 2006; Molloy, 2002), and text-oriented literature education (Öhman, 2015), and researchers tend to lean towards one of the aspects (Rødnes, 2014). Many scholars, however, underpins the importance to promote both the reader and the text within literature education and to activate different aspects (Johansson, 2015; Møller et al., 2010; Torell, 2002). Teaching literature means that you must deal with the paradox of literature reading in school, that is, the importance of developing an interest in reading, while at the same time providing tools that can improve analytic skills (Johansson, 2021). This is even more challenging in middle school, where the young readers might not be ready for literary analysis or are at very different levels of reading skills.

Several of the studies cited above have focused on secondary education. Studies on middle school students tend to focus on the act of reading itself, rather than the reception or the treatment of the
literary text. Researchers take an interest in how to develop reading skills during middle school, often related to reading disabilities (Wexler et al., 2020). Another crucial issue is motivating reluctant readers, which is a challenge for L1 teachers at all stages. There is a consensus about the importance of working actively with literary texts in school from an early age, and also about the fact that reading fiction is often used as padding and that the text itself is rarely dealt with in the classroom, at least not as a literary text. At the same time, researchers unanimously underscore the importance of active and reflected literature teaching to motivate students and help them develop their understanding of literary texts (cf. Ingemansson, 2017). However, there is seldom a focus on working with literary texts in middle school, and there is a lack of conscious teaching of literary texts. Reading fiction in school is, according to Ewald's classroom observations, something that seems to happen without any interference from the teacher and without any specific goals. Students read for a few minutes in the beginning of the day or when they wait for their peers to finish a task (Ewald, 2007). Middle school students mainly focus solely on finishing the text as fast as they can when reading in school (Nikolajeva, 2017). Students also show little interest in the teacher's attempt to make them discuss literary-theoretical topics; instead, they want to discuss the characters and the story itself (van de Ven, 2005).

However, actively teaching inferences helps students to develop a more differentiated discernment of a protagonist's character traits (Rosenbaum, 2019). When actually working with the literary text, even though it is quite rare, middle school students tend to take an interest in the plot (Nikolajeva, 2017; van de Ven, 2005). Nevertheless, students of this age do not always reflect on the importance of understanding the protagonist in order to understand the plot (Rosenbaum, 2019). The strong focus on the plot can be understood as a way of working with reading comprehension, but it can also be related to a desire to develop a personal reading experience (cf. Ivy & Broaddus, 2001).

One way of motivating students is by using book talks as a teaching method (Batchelor & Cassidy, 2019; Stone, 2000). This method requires an open discussion about the literary text, to develop active participation and engagement among the students (Dahl Rasmussen, 2020). Other motivating factors related to method are the connection between reading and writing, and the importance of being able to relate to the characters (Larrivé, 2014). Individual reading or teacher read-alouds in the classroom can also motivate middle school students (Ivy & Broaddus, 2001). Another important factor is the connection between book selection and motivation (Dallacqua, 2016). Books that are adapted to the reading age do not always attract the students' attention. Instead, reading complex and challenging texts can be a strong motivator, even though the students do not understand everything in the text (Blok Johansen, 2015).

To sum up, all the above-mentioned studies share a view of the literary text as having an inherent potential to become an important instrument for developing reading skills as well as life skills. They also share the view that this potential is too seldom taken advantage of in school, and that teachers have an important role to play (Ivy & Broaddus, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

The present study is a qualitative reception study, and thus reception theorists inspire the theoretical framework. Theories about the reader's interaction with the text (Iser, 1974) are used to explain patterns in the students' written and oral comments. Iser (1974) describes the reader's interaction with the literary text as an interaction both with the artefactual text and with its gaps (Leerstellen). There are, according to Iser, certain structures in a text that appear in the same way for different readers, but also gaps that will be interpreted differently by different readers, due to their personality, their background and their literary as well as their general experience. The analysis in the present study investigates how the students interact with narrative texts and seeks to find patterns to understand which structural aspects that seem important for the readers. It also investigates how the students are using the text in their meaning-making.
The theoretical framework also derives from Bruner’s (1986) way of organising thinking as either syntagmatic or paradigmatic. Syntagmatic thinking is linear and mostly related to everyday communication. Paradigmatic thinking is nonlinear and refers to a scientific way of organising the world. In the context of reading literary texts, syntagmatic thinking links to aspects of identification and empathy, whereas paradigmatic thinking relates to analysis. This study takes an interest in investigating which kind of thinking is activated by the middle school students in their reading of a narrative text and discusses how knowledge on this can impact literature education of children.

**Method and Material**

The empirical materials analysed in the study are 58 written and 13 oral comments on narrative texts. Students from four different classes participated in the study, 13 from the 5th grade and 45 from the 6th grade. Twenty-six of the students were girls and 32 were boys. They were from two different schools in two small Swedish municipalities (about 10,000 [school A] and 30,000 inhabitants [school B]). About 80% of the municipalities’ inhabitants have no post-secondary education. On the other hand, the unemployment rate is fairly low. The immigration rates in the two municipalities are 26% and 25%. This is reflected in school A, but not in school B, which is located in a smaller village (about 1500 inhabitants), with a lower immigration rate and very few students with a foreign language as their mother tongue. The participating classes can be considered representative of a typical Swedish context, even though the results must be understood in relation to the possible impact of the geographical context.

The material consists of two parts. The first is a written assignment, in which the students commented on a short story. The students were first instructed to listen to a short story, read aloud by the researcher, while following the text in hand-out copies in front of them. They were then asked, in a written instruction that was also explained orally, to write down at least three examples of what they noticed when listening to and reading the text. They were given some suggestions, such as writing about what they found strange, difficult, good, bad, interesting, boring, worth discussing, etc. The latter part of the instruction was added to help the informants to get started and is reflected in their answers, as many of them have used the presented adjectives in their texts. The students were asked to write as much as possible, and they had access to the short story throughout the session. The texts were between nine and 253 words in length. Some of them are written as bullet lists, others in running text. The students wrote for a period comprehended between one and 28 min.

The second part used a think-aloud protocol. Thirteen of the 58 students were selected by their teachers to participate. Since this was an oral exercise, the researcher, together with the teachers, decided to choose those who would want and dare to speak, but not necessarily the strongest in terms of performance. First, the students had a short training session in smaller groups. Together with the researcher, they read a poem that had been segmented and was shown to them on a large screen. They were instructed to read aloud and comment orally on everything that came to mind. The methodological approach has been inspired by Pieper & Wieser (2012) and Levine & Horton (2015). In both these studies, the importance of training sessions is underpinned. During the training session, the researcher gave detailed instructions and examples of what they could comment on. After that, each student completed the think-aloud assignment individually. The sessions took place in a small room next to the classroom, and other than the student, the researcher was the only person in the room. The students read a segmented short story from a computer screen, where each segment appeared in a PowerPoint presentation. Hence, they were able to control the scrolling themselves and could stay on each page for as long as they wanted. The story was segmented

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1One of the tests had to be interrupted due to a visit to the swimming pool. The student only read half the text but is included in the study.
into ten segments of about 15 lines each. The text was cut where there was a new paragraph. The sessions were (audio) recorded and have been transcribed. The researcher remained silent during the sessions, except when a student scrolled past a text segment without commenting. The student was then reminded to express everything that came to mind. The sessions lasted between 7:38 and 25:22 min.

Both the written texts and the oral recordings have been analysed with a qualitative thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The texts were read or listened through several times and segments of them were colour coded according to their main focus. The initial coding resulted in a large number of codes, which were, in the next stage, grouped into three main categories. These categories are used to identify patterns in the students’ texts. The texts are categorised according to their main focus, even though there can be elements of the other categories in each text. In addition, signs of interpretation and implicit as well as explicit expressions of comprehension have been analysed and compared. The analysis procedure in the first step was inductive, whereas the analysis of interpretation and comprehension best can be described as abductive. In the latter case, I was actively looking for these aspects.

**Ethics**

Since the participants are underaged their guardians have provided informed consent on behalf of the children. Measures have been taken to protect the privacy of the research subjects. The written and oral comments are anonymised and coded and the participating schools are described in general terms to avoid identification. The material does not treat any sensitive information.

**Methodological Considerations**

The use of written comments has proven to be an efficient way of getting access to students’ spontaneous reactions to a text (Johansson, 2015), given that they are asked to write whatever comes in mind. However, there were significant differences in the students’ ability to express themselves, which, of course, can affect the results of the study. Even though writing skills are not taken into consideration in the analysis, some participants might have refrained from expressing all their thoughts, due to poor writing, laziness or a lack of interest in the task. The analysis cannot consider these underlying obstacles and focuses only on the content of the texts.

Expressing spontaneous reactions orally and to remember to say everything that comes to mind while reading is difficult. Despite the training session, the students had difficulties – to various extents – expressing their every thought while reading. With the benefit of hindsight, the training sessions should have been longer and used more texts of different kinds. They should probably also have been individual, but with the time provided by the teachers this was not possible, and the results should be understood in view of this.

The design is experimental and explores what happens in a classroom when students meet an unfamiliar text for the first time. The underlying hypothesis is that they will use the tools that literature education has provided. The setting of the study is their ordinary classroom, and the intervention is sanctioned by the teachers, who were also present in the classroom during the sessions. There are reasons to believe that the school setting leads the students into an institutional reading, inspired by literature education. Even though we do not observe classes in this study, patterns in the students’ comments make it possible to understand them as a product of literature education.

Using two different narrative texts and both oral and written material is meant to broaden the perspective and to increase reliability of this qualitative study. Even though there are fewer oral comments, due to the time aspect (it takes a long time to collect an individual material), this part of the study is important to strengthen the results.
Presentation of the Literary Texts

The short story used in the written assignment was “Emily and Eddy” (1986), a children’s book written by the Swedish author Birgitta Stenberg. It is a story written for the age group, but not very widely known, so the classes were unlikely to have worked with it before. It has a chronological structure and the language is quite simple, even though it contains some archaic words. There are some hints in the text from which the reader can draw the conclusion that it does not take place in the present day, but also not in too distant a past. The story starts when Eddy, the protagonist, wakes up and discovers that he is all alone. He leaves his apartment to go looking for his mother, and notices that there is a strange atmosphere that day. He meets Emily, a blind beggar girl, who warns him about an undefined danger. After a while, a dark fog descends, and it is impossible to see anything. Emily comes to the rescue – for her, nothing is different from an ordinary day – and she finds her way in the dark. On their way back to Eddy’s apartment, they come across other people in the town, from a wide range of ranks. Emily leads Eddy back to his apartment and in the basement, they find Eddy’s mother, who has fallen and hurt her leg. After being helped, she invites Emily to stay with her and Eddy, but Emily declines, saying that she wants to stay with her friends who live in a shack by the river. There are some gaps in the story, which must be interpreted by the reader. For instance, the dark fog is never explained and Emily’s past and her relationship with Eddy are never explicitly investigated. An adult reader might draw parallels with the London 1952 smog or other similar events, but it is unlikely middle school students in Sweden would think of that. They may, however, relate it to air pollution and environmental issues.

The text used in the think-aloud study was a more recent short story for the age group, “Onsdag eftermiddag” (“Wednesday afternoon”) by the Swedish author David Wiberg, published in 2015. The story is written in everyday language from the protagonist’s perspective. It is an inner monologue, where we follow the protagonist’s thoughts. The story starts in medias res, and characters are introduced without any explanation. The story is somewhat fragmented, and gradually more and more details are revealed. It is Wednesday afternoon, and the protagonist is waiting for someone. After a while, the reader can conclude that there has been a divorce and the protagonist is waiting to be picked up for the week at the dad’s house. The father has a new family and the mother is sad. This particular story was chosen because of its everyday language, its fragmentary structure and its theme, which describes a situation that is probably familiar to the majority of the students, through either their own experience or that of their friends. There are a number of gaps, some of which are explained further in the text, while others have to be interpreted by the reader.

Content-related, Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Readings

The analysis of the texts and oral comments resulted in the creation of three categories: content-related, syntagmatic and paradigmatic readings. All of the 58 texts in the written assignment contain content-related parts, and it is fair to say that the majority of them mainly focus on the plot. The texts in the second category contain elements of personal reflections, that often go beyond the plot. The student comes to think about something that he or she has experienced or discusses other real-life issues. In the paradigmatic category, the comments mention aspects related to form and language.

The point of departure in almost all of the written comments is the reader’s own opinion about the text, which is not surprising given the instruction. A common way of starting is to write about

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2Birgitta Stenberg (1932–2014) is a Swedish author of book for adults and children, and her books about a young boy named Billy are widely read. There is no English translation of the short story.

3The short story is published in the anthology Bara för dig på mellanstadiet, 12 berättelser [Only for middle school students. 12 stories], which contains 12 short stories for children aged 9–12.
what the students find weird in the short story, or an emotional reaction to the text, as shown in the examples below:

I think that it was weird when his mother had disappeared. It was fun when some people mugged, but Emily didn’t care because it was her friends. (AB4)

I think that it wasn’t very exciting, but it was quite a good story. (AG8)

These introductions enabled due to the instruction, lead to a summary of the content, even though this summary is often mixed with interpretative or comprehension-related comments.

**Content-related Comments**

It seems to be important to straighten out the plot before entering into other aspects of the text (cf. Johansson, 2015). Some of the texts in this study settle with a summary, as can be seen in the following example:

It is about Emily and Eddy and Eddy had lost his mother and he couldn’t find her. But then in the dark he heard a voice and it was a Girl and he recognised the voice and it was Emily. And then she led him to his house and there he gave her a piece of bread and there were many villains and they were Emily’s friends and that was why she didn’t steel [!] them. (BB13)

This text, written in eight minutes, shows that the student has a basic view of the main events in the story, even though he does not mention anything about the missing mother being found. The following example also shows how the students produce summaries of the text, but it is a little bit more developed:

It was about a boy who was looking for his mother so he went into town and searched. Then he ran into a beggar whom he recognised. Her name was Emily. Then he saw a couple of men who sat on the ground. They asked for help but Emily recognised them and she knew that they were mean. Then when they got home, his mother called for help. And she told them to go and get help. Her ankle was just sprained. Then when they got into the house Emily had a bread and his mother asked if she wanted to stay with them but she didn’t want to because she had all her friends there. (BG1)

This text summarises all the main events in the story and shows a basic comprehension of them. For someone who is not familiar with the original, however, these summaries do not provide enough information. One important issue is what happens to the overall comprehension of the text when the students fail to straighten out the fundamental plot.

The think-aloud protocol also contains many expressions of content focus. In this case, due to the reading of the text in segments, the content of each segment is summarised, as in the following examples:

That they were at a Thai restaurant and had dessert and that he got a headache because he ate too much. That things aren’t easy for her at home and that there is a lot of fighting, but he tries to relax and watch TV. That she’s worried about her mum and wants her to come home. (TBB1)

But that it is going to be a thunderstorm soon and that she has to get inside before it starts. That she’s waiting for someone. I think that Nalle is a dog since she is looking for the blue rope. Still that it is a dog and that the leash is broken and that she has to go and get it. That something scary has happened and that eh yes. That she goes inside because of the thunder. (TBG1)

Each sentence represents a summary of a segment produced by the student before turning to the next page. The summaries are close to the text and sometimes reuse the exact same words as in

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4 Spelling and grammar errors in the original texts have not been transferred to the translation. Comma splices, word order and sentence construction errors have, where possible, been kept in the translation. When errors that are relevant to the analysis occur in the Swedish texts, this will be explained in a footnote.

5 A and B in the coding represent the different schools. The second B is for boy and G is for girl. The numbers are consecutive numbers. T indicates an answer from the think-aloud protocol.
the short story. By comparison, the following example starts with a row of questions closely related to the content, but the answers cannot be found in the text. It raises questions about background issues and seeks explanations to events that have happened before the story takes place:

Where did the darkness in the town come from. Why did Emily’s mother sprain her ankle. Why was everybody so afraid. Why didn’t anyone stop the thieves. Why are the thieves Emily's friends and why is she blind. Why was Eddy poor in the rich city. (AB9)

Reactions to the plot can also relate to emotions and aspects that the students find strange. It is still a content-related comment, but it also puts forward a more personal voice and a reaction to characters and events.

**Personal Comments – Syntagmatic Readings**

The personal comments link either to the surrounding world or to the student’s own life and personal experiences and go beyond what is written on the lines. The following example shows how a student relates the events in the story to the real world:

When we read the text, I noticed that a long time ago many people were poor. Many people didn’t have any money to buy food or water, that made me a little sad. Because I think that everyone should have the right to food, both now and then. I also was happy. Because if Emily hadn’t been blind, they couldn’t have helped each other. Another thing that I thought was good was that Emily told off a man lying on the pavement. (BG10)

The student describes feelings of both sadness and joy. She feels sorry for the poor and she makes a comment about poverty in the real world, outside the short story. She is happy when Emily helps Eddy, and she expresses an opinion about how Emily treats the rich man. There are also students who write about societal or environmental problems, as shown in the following examples:

I think that Emily and Eddy live in Sweden. If you live in Sweden and have parents that are poor, you should have social security benefits. (BB11)

I felt sorry for Emily, Eddy and the other children who had torn clothes, since children shouldn’t have to live under difficult conditions when they are young. (BB14)

[…] The book takes place in the past when society was less equal with many poor and rich people. I also came to think about the environment when they let out so much bad things in the air so that you could hardly see or breathe. I felt sorry for Eddy’s mum too. (BG8)

The comments express an opinion about how things should be, which can be a sign of compassion and empathy directed towards the characters in the short story. In addition, the third comment mentions the environment and makes connections between the literary text and real-life environmental issues, albeit slightly vaguely expressed.

The oral comments in the think-aloud protocol relate even more to the students’ own experiences. Both methodological choices and the everyday plot and language in the short story used in this part of the study can explain the personal focus. Notwithstanding this, what comes up in the students’ minds when reading is closely related to things they have done or experiences they have had in life.

Sometimes when I am home alone and then … well, maybe it doesn’t belong here … so …

I think about the stable where I used to go horse riding. Once here in X-town, when I was at home, the sky was all orange.

I think about ping-pong, when you play ping-pong.

I don’t know, maybe when I bake or something, like deep fried bananas.

I think about a youtuber, because there is a youtuber named Antonia, who I like very much.

In Halmstad, there is a cabin that I have visited twice, and there is a plum tree. (TBG1)
New glasses … I think about my brother who always breaks them. […] I think about when I go cycling with my friends and that I have fun with my bike. (TAB1)

These two examples are extracts from longer oral comments and each of them refers to a single segment, that is, when turning the page, the student comes to think of a personal experience linked to what he or she has just read in the short story. As shown by the examples, the students are referring to everyday events in the past or in the present. This means that a syntagmatic reading is spontaneously activated.

**Form-related Comments – Paradigmatic Readings**

Many students mention language-related aspects, but only when they do not understand a word or when they react to the spelling of certain words. There is only one text in the written assignment that has been categorised as mainly formal, and none of the oral comments have been categorised thus. The written comment reads as follows:

- I would have wanted to know who Eddie is, because then you get a description of his background.
- Is there a story behind why Emily turned blind? If they had written that it would have been easier to understand the text.
- Certain words are different from how I usually write them, like “sej”, “dej” and “mej”.
- The words are quite difficult, for instance “jämme” and “famlade”.
- There was a word “opp” that I don’t use very often. Instead I use “upp”.
- The poem comes rather unexpectedly but in this case it was good that Eddie had the courage to follow Emily. If he had wandered alone, he might not have made it home in time to save his mother. […]
- “Söla” – I have learnt that it means “klabba”, so for me it is in the wrong context.6
- At the end of the text Eddie says “Yes, for us” you could explain what you mean and how did it end for Emily? (AG1)

The first two bullet points criticise the story, by saying that there are not enough descriptions or enough background information about the characters, and demands more information, which according to the student, could have helped her get a better understanding of the story. The three following bullet points comment on the lexical level, as does the seventh bullet point. In the latter case, the student comments on a word that has a different meaning in the short story from what she is used to. The bullet point about the poem points to a rupture in the short story, where Emily sings a song, and contains an interpretation of what it could mean. The last bullet point is a question about the interpretable ending.

The lack of analytic, literary readings in the study could indicate that paradigmatic reading is not privileged in the students’ approach to the narrative text at least not when it comes to structural aspects, such as composition and perspective. Summarising a content can be a part of a paradigmatic reading, but as shown above, there are many syntagmatic readings combined with the summaries.

**Comprehension and Interpretation**

This section discusses meaning-making, which includes both comprehension and interpretation, in narrative texts. The most fundamental aspect of comprehension is the lexical level (Perfetti, 2007; Zhang, 2020), which refers to understanding words. Lexical comprehension can be related to the

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6The student refers to two Swedish words that have several meanings.
cognitive process of decoding (Zhang, 2020), but in this study it refers to understanding the actual meaning of a word. This is also closely related to context, i.e., general and cultural knowledge.

The study displays various ways of dealing with a lack of understanding of separate words that the students come across while reading. The most common way is just to mention the word that you do not understand as something you have noticed:

I noticed a word, which was gilded, I don’t know what it means. (AG9)

The students note that there is a difficulty, but they do not try to solve the problem. Cultural aspects, as well as lexical aspects, are often treated as questions as in the following example:

What do they mean and why was there a woman in a carriage, only babies ride in carriages. How could Emily know that a man was lying across the street she was blind. How could the smoke from the chimneys go downwards, that’s not common. How could Eddy feel that it was going to be a bad day? Maybe he had experienced this before. With the smoke and all. He probably recognised it. (AG9)

The text displays several examples of comprehension-related issues, for instance the misunderstanding of the word “carriage”. This is the same student who claims not to understand the word “gilded”, which might be related to her misunderstanding of the type of carriage. Picturing the woman in a baby carriage probably leads to confusion, but the student does not return to the text to straighten things out.

The think-aloud protocol allows us to follow how understanding is built up as a process and provides an insight into students’ techniques when dealing with understanding a literary text. It also provides an insight into how interpreting takes place by filling in the gaps (Iser, 1974) in the text. There are several gaps in the two short stories, and especially in the story used in the think-aloud protocol. Since the students encounter this text in segments, they are forced to use the clues given in each segment, and they are also forced to modify their first impressions as they go along. The students in this part of the study more often try to find answers in the text, but a misread or misunderstanding seems difficult to abandon. In the first example below, the student concludes that the narrator is dead and that the story is being retold from beyond the grave.

It seems as if the self is dead somehow I think because it reads as I did the last evening and that something happened and that it was two years ago […].

It seems as if the self is visible again, since someone is hugging it. It’s confusing.

Even though there are several passages in the story that ought to inform the reader about the unrealistic interpretation of the main character being dead, which the student also recognises, she will not abandon her first interpretation. In this case, when the student is left alone with the text, without a guiding teacher or peer to discuss it with, she can stick to her opinion without being contradicted and thus remains confused.

The next example shows the opposite, how a student – thanks to close reading – can modify her opinion as she reads along and gains more and more information:

Maybe mum is away at work but no she is out shopping or something and there is something that she really wants to tell and she really wants her to come home.

No, now I think about, now they say … that I can see before me that he does something funny. Maybe the mother hasn’t been shopping, but is picking up her brother, whom she hasn’t seen for a long time.

I can hear her in her room then I think that Sara isn’t her friend, but her sister I think.

She did go to her place – Antonia’s – didn’t she?

I thought that they were at Antonia’s but Antonia leaves on her bicycle. (TBG2)
In this example, we can follow the student’s hesitation towards her own reading, and how new information makes her modify former interpretations. It is not surprising to see that the modifying strategy helps the reader to build up his or her understanding of the text more efficiently.

Finally, we will look at some examples of what the students do when asked to summarise the whole story and make a conclusive comment. Some of the comments are proof of deep understanding and interpretation, while others still display many questions. In the two following examples, it is possible to follow the students’ reflections as they go deeper into trying to understand, even though they are still quite confused:

Someone, like a person who they normally miss, but who the mother is afraid of, like a father. Let’s say that the dad hasn’t been good to the mother, but he still loves his children, but the mother doesn’t dare to come up to the father. She is afraid. This is kind of what I think, but at first there was something about it being like when a person came like he was thinking about, if he missed him. That made me think that the person might be dead but then this person came, and I thought that he is the one that the main character was thinking about and missing. That is my summary. (TAG1)

I don’t know. I think it’s about a girl who is really excited about a boy’s visit. I think it is a boyfriend or a close friend that she hasn’t met in a long time and her mother doesn’t like him, I guess, or she becomes really sad. Something might have happened. Then this thunder thing, I don’t get it. Sara is her sister because they live together. Antonia is her mother’s friend. I think they are quite close; it feels like it. I think that the story was a bit unclear it goes back and forth. (TBG2)

Even though very few students talk about a message, several of the conclusive comments can be understood as the students’ attempts to find a message behind the text, as shown below:

That it is about the family, that you should stick together, well they fought but that they still like each other and that you should make the most of it while you have it. (TBG7)

I thought that the book’s message was nice. That even if you can’t see, it doesn’t have to mean the end of the world. There’s a beauty in that too. I don’t quite know, but that’s how I understood it. (BG8)

In this concluding phase, the students tend to zoom out and look at the text from a different perspective. They try to generalise and transfer the events of the story into a broader meaning that actually means something in the real world outside the text.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

The students’ reception is mainly oriented towards the plot, which results in short summaries, often in combination with a personal comment or opinion. Even though some of the students show a good level of comprehension, an important result is that it is not easy to identify the most important elements in a story and re-tell them in a clear and comprehensible way. Many comments therefore focus on insignificant details instead of the bigger picture, which sometimes makes it difficult to see where the actual issue lies – in reading or in writing. Another finding is that a more complicated narrative structure is challenging for students, which underscores the importance of working with different types of texts, also of a more complex structure.

It is not very surprising that middle school students focus on the plot, since many of them are still at the beginning of their reading development and thus teaching is concentrated on reading comprehension. The tendency to work with the plot, as found in earlier studies (Nikolajeva, 2002; van de Ven, 2005), remains. Nor is it surprising that there is little focus on literary analysis and paradigmatic readings, even though understanding literary conventions could help students develop their paradigmatic reading. It is also important to keep in mind that the middle school student might not even be susceptible for paradigmatic readings and not mature enough to deal with literary texts in this way. The natural way for the age group to react to the literary text seems to be content-related and this needs to be treated with respect in literature education, since the plot is probably the main reason why young readers engage in fiction at all. The middle school student does not read literary texts for analysis, but for pleasure and for learning about themselves and
the world. Relating to earlier studies (Ewald, 2007) it is not implausible that literature teaching in middle school will be mostly preoccupied with developing the syntagmatic reading. This is also what should be focused when working with this age group. However, even though it is neither realistic nor desirable to introduce too many technical aspects of analysis at an early age, it seems to be important to introduce some knowledge about text structures. Awareness is a good starting point for helping students to gain a better understanding and greater experience. As shown above, a spontaneous reading can be a point of departure, and – with help from the teacher – spontaneous reading can become more analytical. It is, however, crucial that the analysis is adapted to the age group. It is a delicate matter to develop the students’ knowledge of literature, without impeding the pleasure of reading.

It is important as a literature teacher to have a good understanding of what might cause comprehension problems. Comprehension is mainly focused on the lexical level. However, the students did not seem to have any clear strategies for dealing with the lexical issues. When reading together, for instance when the teacher reads aloud, the teacher easily solves the problem with an oral explanation, but when the students are alone with the text, they must have access to a number of strategies. We do not know from this study why the students seem to settle with incomprehension of words. In some cases, the failure to understand an individual word does not affect the overall comprehension of the text, which may explain why they do not seem to bother very much. The situation, in which the students are reading a text for an investigation, might also have an impact; it is easier to shrug one’s shoulders when faced with a difficult word when you know that you are not going to be assessed or questioned about it. However, we must ask ourselves if this lack of strategy – at least with some students – reflects that they are used to reading texts without understanding them. Even though lexical issues are easy to solve it is important to identify them, since reading without understanding is – obviously – boring.

When left alone with no auxiliary resources other than the text, the only strategy is to make use of the text itself and seek answers through a close reading. The lack of close reading in the investigation has an effect on the way in which the students dealt with and interpreted the gaps in the text. The students had difficulties when it came to interpreting the implicit. When they did interpret, they often made unexpected interpretations, which were difficult to link back to parts of the text. This can be understood as an outcome of a vivid imagination, but it can lead to comprehension problems. The think-aloud method allows us to gain an insight into how students associate and construct meaning during reading and has shown that the extra-textual connections to your own experiences can be helpful, as long as you keep coming back to the text. The think-aloud protocol also shows how the students either stuck to their first interpretation or modified it while reading. The most efficient way to construct meaning and make reasonable interpretations is to switch between these two strategies and to do so in close relation to the text. One important conclusion is that reading with an open mind is something to put forward in literature teaching at early stages, but also that students need help and guidance to make use of the text. Working together (Pesout & Nietfeld, 2021) and under a teacher’s guidance (cf. Dahl Rasmussen, 2020; Liang, 2011) is essential, not at least at younger age. The concluding summaries in the think-aloud protocol show a potential for using clues in the text to connect the literary text to extra-textual aspects and to relate it to a broader context. The students’ ability to go further and draw parallels with a bigger picture is a strength that ought to be used in the classroom. But it is also crucial not to forget the actual literal reading on the lines. What does the text actually say? Before having established that, it is no use trying to interpret what is written between the lines.

This study, together with similar studies in other contexts, has confirmed that the role of the literary text is complex: it can be used as a tool for reading comprehension, but as such, the teacher must take into consideration literary conventions as one important aspect of the work with the literary text in school, even with young children. The literary text can also be an important key to understanding oneself and the surrounding world and, as such, literature teaching must help activate these mechanisms as well. They can never be activated when the text is incomprehensible. The
study thus confirms the importance of both sense and sensibility in literature education from an early age or, as Nikolajeva (2014) puts it “[…] reading fiction, is not merely a pleasurable, yet meaningless pastime; it is essential for our cognitive, social and emotional development.” (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 226). In other words, literature education, no matter what the age of the students, needs to activate both syntagmatic and paradigmatic reading, adapted to the students’ age and cognitive maturity. The most efficient way to do so in middle school, is probably not to work with literary analysis, but if the students are not used to reading fiction and therefore not familiar with text structures and composition, it is necessary to teach them, so that these aspects do not form a hindrance for the reading experience. Literature teaching must never, however, contribute to less reading and therefore, the most important and urgent issue for the middle school literature teacher today is to awaken the desire to read and to enter the imaginary worlds of literature.

Disclosure Statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding
This work was supported by Linköpings Universitet, Styrelsen för utbildningsvetenskap.

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