



## Effects of two types of task instructions on literary text comprehension and motivational and affective factors



Sofie Henschel <sup>a,\*</sup>, Christel Meier <sup>b</sup>, Thorsten Roick <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Bismarckstraße 1, 91054 Erlangen, Germany

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### ABSTRACT

This experimental study investigated the effects of two types of task instructions on text comprehension, motivation, and emotional involvement. In all, 226 9th graders in low academic tracks were randomly assigned to complete reader-oriented (RO), text-based (TB), or no tasks after reading literary texts to elaborate their mental text representation. Whereas RO tasks encouraged emotional engagement and indirectly stimulated text analysis through creative activities, TB tasks focused on cognitive activity and directly encouraged text analysis. After students completed the tasks, they answered test items on content- and form-related text comprehension. The results indicate that form-related comprehension improved when students elaborated their mental text representation through TB tasks. By contrast, RO students were more interested in the tasks, and they showed slightly more emotional involvement. As the two types of task instructions seemingly have different effects, they may be considered complementary elements in instructional practices for lower academic tracks.

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### 1. Introduction

Comprehending a text requires the reader to actively process textual information (Kintsch, 1998). Specifically, readers must engage in cognitively complex processes of inference construction and elaboration to build a coherent mental model that reflects their depth of comprehension. The Construction-Integration Model (CI; Kintsch, 1998) describes how readers cognitively process a text. According to this model, the text is represented at three increasingly abstract levels during the comprehension process: The *surface level* contains the text's verbatim structure (words and phrases), but it does not include the meaning of the text. The next level is the *textbase*, which is organized in a network of interrelated propositions. A proposition is generally considered to represent the underlying meaning of the explicit information in the text. In addition, for many literary texts, form-related characteristics of the surface structure, such as rhyme and rhythm, must be integrated into the textbase to establish cohesion. If the reader encounters gaps at the textbase level, he will engage in effortful inferential processes. More precisely, readers activate more prior knowledge to the extent

that it is available, and they connect it with ideas in the text. Therefore, the *situation model* reflects the most coherent situation-specific understanding of the text. Notwithstanding, the different levels of the mental representation are more or less dominant. For example, comparing readers who were instructed to read the same text as a literary text or as an expository text in an experimental study, Zwaan (1993) showed that readers in the literary mode put more emphasis on linguistic cues at the surface level; they built different (e.g., emotional) inferences; and they used bottom-up processes more intensely than strategic top-down processes. These processes privileged the construction of a strong textbase and postponed the development of a comparatively weak situation model when compared with those of readers in the expository mode. Furthermore, literary texts are often ambiguous and may stimulate readers to develop several concurrent or coordinated situation models (Kintsch, 1998).

Literary texts hold specific constraints (e.g., poetic forms, ambiguity), which are not explicitly covered in the CI model (Kintsch, 1998). For example, literary theories, such as the theory of aesthetic semiotics (Eco, 1990), strongly emphasize that literary text comprehension involves both content-related understanding and form-related understanding. Accordingly, Zwaan and Radvansky (1998) have shown that form-related aspects, such as the narration mode and other linguistic cues, draw the reader's attention to

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [sofie.henschel@hu-berlin.de](mailto:sofie.henschel@hu-berlin.de) (S. Henschel), [christel.meier@fau.de](mailto:christel.meier@fau.de) (C. Meier), [thorsten.roick@hu-berlin.de](mailto:thorsten.roick@hu-berlin.de) (T. Roick).

the content of important text passages and may influence how readers construct inferences. In a similar vein, [Frederking et al. \(2012\)](#) found that content-related and form-related comprehension represent distinguishable facets of literary text comprehension. These results suggest that readers construct and integrate propositions and inferences about the semantic content as well as the function and meaning of formal characteristics into their mental text representations ([Frederking et al., 2012](#)). Thus, process models of text comprehension, such as the CI model ([Kintsch, 1998](#)), should also consider the text's genre-specific characteristics and describe how content-related (e.g., ambiguity) and form-related (e.g., narration mode) features guide the process of inference construction and the ways in which readers construct the levels of the mental text representation.

How readers create meaning from literary texts is also the focus of reader-response theories, which originated from literary theory ([Beach, 1993](#)). Several reader-response approaches highlight different angles (e.g., textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural), which illuminate particular aspects of the reader, text, and context interaction. The transactional theory is one important approach to reader-response theory ([Rosenblatt, 1978, 1996](#)). According to this approach, readers engage in overlapping transactional processing activities when reading (for an overview, see [Beach, 1993](#)), such as *engaging* (becoming emotionally involved in, empathizing with or identifying with the text), *constructing* (creating alternative worlds), and *imagining* (creating visual images to explore and extend a response). Such activities are often embedded in experiential approaches to teaching ([Beach, 1993](#)) and stimulate the readers' experiences, emotions, and prior knowledge (e.g., through creative activities; [Beach, 1993](#)) that may provoke associations with the content and form of the text. These associations are then used to create a response to the text ([Rosenblatt, 1978](#)) and to establish a coherent mental text representation.

Understanding the relationship between the cognitive model of text comprehension and approaches from literary theory provides a comprehensive perspective on how readers may make meaning from literary texts. It also raises the question of how to best support readers to engage in inferential processes and to establish a coherent understanding of literary texts. However, designing effective educational interventions that address this issue requires application-oriented basic research that explores how the reader's characteristics (e.g., competence level, prior knowledge, motivation), genre-specific text features (e.g., figurative language), and the reading situation (e.g., instruction) influence the comprehension.

### 1.1. Instructional approaches to literary text comprehension

Creating interventions that help students develop a coherent understanding of literary texts seems particularly valuable for weaker readers who are typically in the low academic track. For example, in Germany, literary texts are rarely used in this school track ([Hertel, Hochweber, Steinert, & Klieme, 2010](#)), which might explain why these students have been found to exhibit particular difficulties in understanding literary texts ([Roick, Frederking, Henschel, & Meier, 2013](#)). [Roick et al. \(2013\)](#) examined 1500 9th graders and found that students in all academic tracks (low, intermediate, high) performed worse in literary text comprehension compared with expository text comprehension. However, the performance gap was particularly pronounced in the low academic track because these students omitted a higher proportion of items in the test of literary text comprehension than in the test of expository text comprehension when compared with more proficient readers in higher academic tracks. For the most part, the omitted items addressed the form-related comprehension and required, for example, reflecting on the function and meaning of

figurative language.

Several researchers have discussed whether instructional practices that stimulate transactional processing and encourage readers to connect textual information with personal experiences (e.g., emotions, knowledge) provide an opportunity to foster literary text comprehension ([Beach, 1993](#)). They assume that readers engage more easily in transactional processing when they strongly identify with their role as a reader, which means they construct a personalized understanding of the text based on individual experiences ([Schraw & Bruning, 1999](#)). Transactional beliefs have been found to enhance reading motivation, recall, personal responses, and complex interpretations of literary texts ([Schraw & Bruning, 1999](#)).

To foster transactional processing, literary scholars and researchers suggest reader-oriented instructions that encourage the reader to bring experiences, emotions, thoughts, and knowledge to the text ([Rosenblatt, 1978](#)). Reader-oriented instructions draw on cognitive activity and on emotional and motivational engagement, and they may indirectly stimulate text analysis, for example, through creative activities ([Haas, Menzel, & Spinner, 1994; Zabka, 1995](#)). Previous research indicates that reader-oriented instructions positively affect motivational (e.g., interest in reading, participation in class) and affective measures (e.g., emotional involvement, empathy; [Eva-Wood, 2004; Fialho, Zyngier, & Miall, 2011](#)) and the depth of cognitive processing ([Levine, 2014](#)).

In an experimental think-aloud study by [Eva-Wood \(2004\)](#), students read two poems and were instructed to comment on their thoughts (control group) or both on their thoughts and feelings (experimental group) while reading. Therefore, students in the experimental group used their emotions and experiences to develop an understanding of the text. The results indicate that these students showed greater interest in one of the two texts; they more frequently reported to feel with the speaker; and they provided more empathic responses than the control group. The experimental group also identified more poetic devices and reported a greater proportion and higher quality of elaborative comments. The author surmises that this finding indicates that students in the experimental group were more emotionally involved and gained a deeper understanding of the poems than the control group. However, as only students in the experimental group were instructed to relate their responses to text passages, they may have read the text more attentively than students in the control group and, in turn, achieved a better understanding.

[Fialho et al. \(2011\)](#) adapted the think-and-feel approach of the experimental group above for a two-week intervention with university students who worked on two short stories with different pre-reading homework and in-class instructions. Students in the experimental think-and-feel group received "experiencing" instructions; thus, they were expected to emotionally respond to the text and connect their answers to personal experiences. Students in the control group received (traditional) instructions and applied text-studying strategies to interpret the text. The control group provided longer essays on the storyline in an argumentative style, whereas the experimental group provided more lexically rich essays and used more emotional language. Video data indicated that students in the experimental group were more motivated because they showed, for example, greater participation in class discussions. As the students seemed to benefit differently from the think-and-feel and interpretive approaches, the authors suggested that the two types of instruction should be considered complementary elements when teaching literary reading.

In a quasi-experimental study over a period of four weeks, [Levine \(2014\)](#) examined whether 12th grade high school students improved the range and complexity of their figurative interpretations when they received knowledge about the text structure and learned how to apply everyday affect-based strategies.

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