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Are reading comprehension and literary competence related?

**A study into the relationship between literary
competence and English reading comprehension of
pupils in vwo-5**

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ABSTRACT

Dit onderzoek richtte zich op de relatie tussen literaire competentie en Engelse leesvaardigheid. Onderzoek vond plaats op een Nederlandse school voor havo-vwo. In totaal namen drieënveertig leerlingen uit vwo-5 deel. Daarvan zaten zesentwintig leerlingen in een reguliere vwo-5 klas en zeventien leerlingen in een 5-vwo klas met extra Cambridge Engels. Alle leerlingen namen deel aan een toets Engelse leesvaardigheid en vulden een literaire vragenlijst in. Tot slot beantwoordden twaalf leerlingen, zes uit elke klas, vragen met betrekking tot Engelse literaire fragmenten. Deze test toetste het literaire competentieniveau zoals door de leerlingen aangegeven in de literaire vragenlijst.

De resultaten geven aan dat er een relatie bestaat tussen het literaire competentieniveau van de leerlingen en hun leesvaardigheid in Engels maar meer uitgebreid onderzoek is nodig om de sterkte van de relatie definitief te bevestigen. Uit de data blijkt dat de leerlingen met Cambridge Engels gemiddeld hoger scoorden voor leesvaardigheid en literaire competentie en dat jongens in beide klassen beter scoorden voor leesvaardigheid dan meisjes. In combinatie met de prozatest kan gezegd worden dat de leerlingen redelijk goed hun eigen literaire competentie niveau kunnen bepalen maar voor Engels gemiddeld niet het voor vwo gewenste literaire competentieniveau 4 bereiken.

Gezien de relatie tussen literaire competentie en leesvaardigheid is het wenselijk om scholen te adviseren om het literatuuronderwijs beter aan te sluiten bij individuele leerlingen en gebruik te maken van doorlopende leeslijnen en didactische ondersteuning van websites zoals lezen voor de lijst en de daarvan afgeleide voor het moderne vreemde talen onderwijs.

1. Introduction

'Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammatical competence, and the only way we become good spellers.' (Krashen 2004: 37)

The above cited quote implies many positive effects of reading on language proficiency in general, unfortunately, nowadays in secondary education in the Netherlands, pupils do not read many books (Van Schooten, de Glopper & Stoel, 2004; Witte, 2008). Research in the field of first language acquisition has demonstrated a strong relationship between extended exposure to text and improved reading comprehension (Grabe, 2009). Therefore, it seems likely that one's reading abilities in a second language will also improve by increased reading. To learn a second language successfully Westhoff (2008) propagates extensive reading, 'making mileage'¹, to improve reading comprehension by expanding vocabulary, gaining knowledge of the world, practicing text structures and reading strategies.

During the last decades a decrease in willingness to read novels has been perceived. Verboord (2006: 35) observed that in 2000 the Dutch population read only a third of the number of books they read in 1975, meaning that in 2000 on average less than one hour per week was spent reading books. This number is not likely to have gone up since then as internet and social media take up a lot of youngsters' time nowadays. In schools also a decline in the status of books and literature has been reported (e.g. Van Schooten, De Glopper & Stoel, 2004; Witte, Rijlaarsdam & Schram, 2008). This phenomenon seems to extend from the pupils' first language to all languages taught in schools and may be caused by a number of factors, for instance by the motivation of pupils for reading books or the literary curriculum taught.

At the same time teachers noticed a decline in the central reading exam results for Dutch and the modern foreign languages and wondered whether pupils had become poorer readers. Research by e.g. Van Schooten & De Glopper in 2002 and Orczykowski & Voolstra in 2009, did not endorse these assumptions. Furthermore, recently the central reading exam scores (CITO) seem to indicate that results are nationally on the rise again (SLO, 2015: 29). Nevertheless, given the fact that literary education can be seen as an 'ill structured domain'², it would be interesting to know whether pupils' abilities to read and understand prose and poetry³, are up to the mark when graduating from vwo⁴.

¹ Westhoff, 2008: 'kilometers maken'

² Term coined by Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson & Coulston, 1991, quoted by Witte et al. 2008: 20.

³ Reading film and other cultural expressions of storytelling could be included.

⁴ Dutch pre-university education.

Being able to read well in one's first language (L1) also has benefits for reading in a second language (L2). Research results by Fecteau (1999) showed L1 proficiency scores to be a significant predictor of L2 abilities. Other studies (e.g. Schoonen, Hulstijn & Bossers, 1998; Van Gelderen, Schoonen, Stoel, de Glopper, & Hulstijn, 2007) showed that a relationship exists between pupils' reading proficiency in their L1 and their abilities to read in a second language, and that the subskills needed to become a fluent reader in either are largely similar (Grabe, 2009).

Since the 1980's a communicative approach to language learning has been introduced in Dutch education. This approach regards language learning as swimming in a 'language bath'.⁵ The idea behind TTO, bilingual education⁶, is that pupils hear and speak the L2 during (some of the) classes to get accustomed with the language in a more natural way (Kwakernaak, 2013). Besides bilingual education, schools in the Netherlands may provide 'intensified' foreign language teaching. For English several forms of intensified English education are on offer, one such form is Cambridge English. Pupils may sit for different Cambridge English exams and earn a certificate of proven ability. No matter which trajectory a pupil follows, in order to pass the final English vwo-test, all pupils partake in the country's final exam (CE) by which general reading comprehension in English is tested.

Unlike general reading comprehension, knowledge of literature is tested as part of a school's final exams (SE). Teachers prepare and test their pupils in a school-specific curriculum which may differ considerably between schools. In 2008 Witte introduced a student-orientated framework for teaching Dutch literature which distinguishes between six different levels of literary competence. Witte's approach was used to develop the website 'Lezen voor de lijst', which assists Dutch literary education.⁷ For some time such a developmental reading trajectory has also been researched for foreign languages. Witte's approach was studied for French, English and German (Hommerson-Schreuder, 2010 ; Hartog, 2013; Van der Knaap, 2015).

Summarizing the above, reading in L1 and L2 advances pupils' language skills. However, in order to promote extensive reading in the classroom, empirical data that support the relation between one's reading comprehension and literary competency are needed to justify including more literature in the curriculum (Van der Knaap, 2015).

In this paper I will discuss the relationship between reading comprehension and literary competence of Dutch pupils with regard to L2 English. This study took place at a secondary school for vwo in The Netherlands. Results from three different tests will be analysed to confirm the correlation between literary competence and reading comprehension and to determine the attained levels of

⁵ 'leren zwemmen in het taalbad' Kwakernaak, 2013:42.

⁶ Known as Tweetalig Onderwijs (TTO) in The Netherlands. TTO stands for a form of education by which schools teach some subjects in a foreign language, mostly in English.

⁷ It now also contains a Frisian and German section.

literary competence of participating pupils. The scores from pupils in a regular English class (RegE) and in a Cambridge English class (CamE) will be compared as well as the scores of girls and boys in each class. Pupils in general seem to read fewer books than before but boys more so than girls. (Stichting Lezen, 2014)

Taking Witte's scale of developmental literary competence as a directive, the level of pupils' ability to read in a second language can be researched in connection to their literary competency (Van der Knaap, 2015). Positive research results could be an incentive for educators to include more literature when teaching foreign languages, to make use of continuous reading programs, didactical websites and for instance introduce Free Voluntary Reading in the curriculum (Van der Knaap, 2015).

In short, in the next section the theoretical framework and research questions are elaborated on, in section 3 the educational context and school's background are discussed. Section 4 describes the used methodology. In section 5 the research results are reported and in section 6 follow conclusion and discussion.

2. Theoretical framework and research questions

2.1. Relationship reading in L1 and L2

It is commonly acknowledged that full-fledged reading comprehension consists of mastering a combination of different reading components. These components range from lower order skills such as letter and word recognition to higher order skill such as understanding text structures and interpreting meaning. LaBerge & Samuels (1974) investigated the reading process and concluded that for increased comprehension readers must acquire automaticity of the lower and higher order language processes involved. Automaticity is achieved by lots of practice. Grabe (2009) mentions a longitudinal research by Elley (2000) which showed that getting students to read extensively in a foreign language over a long period of time consistently improved reading comprehension abilities as well as a number of other language skills (Grabe, 2009: 445-446).

Being a good reader in a first language also has effect on one's reading abilities in a foreign language. Research results by Fecteau (1999) showed a significant relationship between L1 reading skills and L2 reading comprehension among more proficient L2 learners and showed that L1 reading skills contribute more to L2 comprehension than does L2 proficiency. Fecteau suggested that those findings should be taken into account in research involving literary text (Fecteau, 1999: 486).

Many studies have been carried out to establish to what degree components of L1 and L2 reading comprehension are similar or different from one another and to what extent skills learnt in the L1 can be used when learning to read in a second language. In a longitudinal study Van Gelderen et al. (2007) found evidence for the relationship between reading comprehension in L1 Dutch and L2 English for pupils in grades 8 through 10. The study measured a number of reading components which included the students' reading comprehension, their linguistic knowledge regarding vocabulary and grammar and their processing efficiency in both Dutch and English. Finally, the students' metacognitive knowledge about reading was also assessed. For the analysis of the effects of these components Van Gelderen et al. (2007) applied three different hypotheses about the relationship between L1 and L2 reading comprehension. Results supported the 'transfer hypothesis', which predicts a strong relationship between L1 and L2 reading comprehension and a strong effect of metacognitive knowledge on L2 reading comprehension. However, they concluded that also language-specific knowledge and fluency contribute to L2 reading performance, indicating that neither the 'threshold hypothesis' nor the 'processing efficiency hypothesis' which predict a more important role for language-specific knowledge and processing skills, could be ruled out completely.

Although it is recognized that besides similarities also differences exist between learning to read in L1 or L2, 'one conclusion to be taken from this discussion of L1/L2 differences is that many if not most of the results of research on component skills that support reading comprehension will

likely apply across L1 and L2 learner groups (except perhaps for beginning to low-intermediate readers.)' (Grabe 2009: 449). Previous research made clear a relationship exists between language competencies in Dutch and English reading. Following Fecteau, Van der Knaap (2015) is interested whether this also holds true for literary texts and to what extent literary competence level in L1 is transferable to an L2.

2.2. Reading comprehension and literary education

In 'The power of Reading', Krashen (2004) argues that becoming a good reader takes a lot of reading practice. Krashen suggests teaching foreign languages using meaningful texts, communication strategies and free voluntary reading (FVR). According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, languages acquisition takes place during interaction whereby the foreign language is spoken and when a pupil is given input that is one step beyond his present level of competence (a.k.a zone of proximal development, Vygotsky 1978). E.g. if a pupil is at stage 'i' then maximum acquisition takes place when he gets exposed to comprehensible input at an 'i + 1 - level'. Regarding literary competence other researchers (e.g. Beach, Appleman, Hynds & Wilhelm, 2007; Witte, 2008) also take the view that extensive reading '*makes perfect*'.

A school's literary curriculum may be characterized by the approach taken. In general four different approaches to literary education can be perceived: 1 an author-oriented literary historical approach, 2 a text-oriented structure-analysis approach, 3 a context-oriented sociological approach or 4 a reader-oriented personal development approach (Janssen, 1998), cited in Van Schooten, De Glopper & Stoel, 2004: 349). Obviously, school curricula may also combine mentioned approaches and this is commonly the case. Of late the fourth approach, a reader-oriented and text experiencing approach is most often advised because it increases pupils' intrinsic motivation for reading and this approach satisfies learning goal requirements which ask pupils to speak about and reflect upon books they have read⁸.

To be able to interpret and reflect on texts pupils are taught different strategies. For literary education in the class room one such approach is 'instruction in self-questioning as literary reading strategy' (Janssen, 2002). It is important for pupils to have an open and questioning attitude towards literary texts, therefore a reader-oriented approach works best, she argues. Her research showed that being encourage to ask questions about literary texts themselves, boosts pupils' appreciation for stories and is positive for reading motivation.⁹

⁸ Domain E Literature School Exam requirements. Examenblad moderne vreemde talen.

⁹ Following Janssen (2002), Janssen, Braaksma & Rijlaarsdam (2006), Janssen & Braaksma (2007), reading strategies use while reading a short story during a think aloud protocol was tested as a follow-up study for PGO2. Thinking aloud is considered another good strategy for teaching literature in the classroom in a communicative setting as output is also an indication of the literary competence level of the pupil.

However, pupils asking questions in a communicative classroom setting is not common practice. Literary education is still considered an 'ill-structured domain'¹⁰ because what exactly its 'revenue' should be is difficult to determine and because it is not known what the effective elements of teaching literature are precisely (Witte, Rijlaarsdam & Schram, 2008: 20). Accordingly, schools' literary curricula may differ greatly with regard to content and approach, frequently diminishing the role of reading literature in education.

Extensive Reading in L2 and reading literature in L2 have similar gains for the reader but are not the same. On top of the gains attributed to reading in general, such as improving vocabulary, grammar, text comprehension and knowledge of countries and cultures, literary texts can be used to teach aesthetics and intercultural development and literary texts are considered an important source of intellectual, ethical and emotional development (Van der Knaap, 2015: 211). However, in order to achieve the positive effects of literary reading, Van der Knaap continues, 'a positive reading climate which is also emphasized in *'De doorgaande leeslijn'*¹¹ is essential' (Van der Knaap, 2015: 214).

Altogether, reading literature in L1 and L2 advances not only pupils' general language skills but reading literature also helps to advance pupils' personal development providing a positive reading climate exist. Presuming that this extra knowledge will also facilitate the pupil passing the final exam reading comprehension test, it's surprising that reading books play such a diminished role in language education (Van der Knaap, 2015).

The following paragraph looks at Witte's developmental program for literary competence which should be taken into account when one wants to implement an extensive reading program in schools (Kwakernaak, 2013: 398).

2.3 Witte's Differentiation model for literary development

Witte (2008) researched literary development and reading motivation amongst havo¹² and vwo pupils for Dutch literature. Their teachers were asked to develop pupils' literary competence and motivation by helping them with their book choices and related activities, fitting the pupils' present literary competence level. This resulted in a differentiation model for literary development which was the basis for the website 'Lezen voor de lijst'.nl.

Witte (2008) pinpointed a decade old problem in Dutch literary education; pupils have too little reading experience when they start reading literature in the upper grades, and lately due to modern media this problem has become bigger because pupils do not voluntarily read as many books

¹⁰ See note 2.

¹¹ The objective of the *'De doorgaande leeslijn'* is a continuous reading trajectory whereby pupils start reading from a young age in order to reach the highest possible levels of literacy before leaving school (Stichting Lezen <http://www.lezen.nl/lezen-van-0-18>).

¹² Havo stands for higher secondary education consisting of five school years.

as before (Witte, Rijlaarsdam & Schram, 2008: 19). Literary development is regarded as a socialization process because it does not blossom automatically. Witte et al. (2008:21) cite from German research by Garbe (2002)¹³ which showed that literary education of adolescents aged 15-18 is the most important factor regarding their literary socialization. Therefore, in schools a well-structured literary curriculum is a necessity as 'development of literary competence is a cumulative process which does not increase gradually as it is a discontinuous process whereby each level lays the foundations for the next level' (Witte, Rijlaarsdam & Schram, 2009).

Key concepts in Witte's 2008 differentiation model for developmental literary education are the literary competence levels N1 up and to N6 which describe a climbing competence scale from level 1 (very limited competence) to level 6 (very extended competence). The different levels are used to characterize the pupils as readers in order to decide which books and learning activities are suited and tie up with their present level of literary competence. Pupils at a certain level of literary competence express specific behaviours towards literature. According to Witte the manner of reading is determined by the reader's view on literature and the reason for reading. 'At the beginning of literary development pupils are not inclined to read voluntarily and still have to discover that reading literature is functional and can fulfil many knowledge cravings of the pupil' (Witte et al., 2009: 31). The six levels of literary competence describe six different manners of reading literature and can be identified as: 1 experiencing, 2 recognising, 3 reflecting, 4 interpreting, 5 literary and 6 academic reading.

For a long time it was difficult to assess a pupil's literary competence level and to be able to differentiate (teach each pupil literature at his or her appropriate level of development), however, Witte (2008) has provided a useful tool for all language teachers. Hommersom-Schreuder, Paulis and ten Brinke-Teeuwissen (2010) tested the literary competence levels for French and English and also linked Witte's literary competence levels to CEFR levels of language ability. Apparently when the books are appropriate to their language skills as well as their literary level, it increased pupils' motivation to read. Also Hartog (2013) describes how pupils could be motivated to read English books when stimulated in this way. His approach resulted in the website 'novellist.nl'.

The next paragraph describes the CEFR-levels by which proficiency levels for foreign languages are identified and how they are combined with literary competence levels.

2.4. Literary competence levels combined with CEFR levels

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) was published in 2001 by the Council of Europe. The CEFR describes the levels of proficiency for modern foreign languages and

¹³ Garbe, C.(2002). De literaire socialisatie van jongeren in de mediamaatschappij. Onderzoeksperspectieven uit Duitsland.

strives to provide a common base for the attainment of educational goals, lesson programs and exams all over Europe based on a communicative language teaching approach.

The CEFR distinguishes six levels of language proficiency and general descriptors for each level indicate which language abilities belong to that level with regard to content and quality. Level A stands for basic user, level B for independent user and level C for proficient user and each level can be subdivided again. The lowest level is A1 which indicates a beginner's level, subsequently a foreign language learner may climb through levels, A2, B1, B2, C1 to the highest level C2, which describes an effortless language proficiency regardless of complexity. The CEFR differentiates between five language skills; reading, watching and listening, spoken interaction, speaking and writing. From 2007 onwards the CEFR has been applied to the Dutch central language exams. CEFR describes language abilities as different levels which are linked to the exam requirements. For vwo this means that students are tested at a B2/C1 level when reading English (SLO, 2015: 18). See Table 1. for CEFR descriptions given for each level regarding reading in general.

Table 1. General descriptions for reading at CEFR levels¹⁴

CEFR	Descriptors Overall Reading Comprehension
A1	Can understand very short, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words and basic phrases and rereading as required.
A2	Can understand short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary, including a proportion of shared international vocabulary items.
B1	Can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension. Can understand short, simple texts on familiar matters of a concrete type which consist of high frequency every day or job-related language.
B2	Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low frequency idioms.
C1	Can understand in detail lengthy, complex texts, whether or not they relate to his/her own area of speciality, provided he/she can reread difficult sections.
C2	Can understand and interpret critically virtually all forms of the written language including abstract, structurally complex, or highly colloquial literary and non-literary writings. Can understand a wide range of long and complex texts, appreciating subtle distinctions of style and implicit as well as explicit meaning.

For literary competence, Witte's six different levels describe the associated abilities of a reader at that level. In *An Empirically grounded theory of Literary Development* by Witte, Rijlaarsdam & Schram (2012), a competence scale with common benchmarks and norms for six levels of literary

¹⁴ Source: CEFR http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

competence is given. This scale indicates that for (Dutch) literature the vwo-pupils should reach level 4 to receive a satisfactory mark and a pass from their teachers by the time they partake in the final school exams (SE) (Witte, Rijlaarsdam & Schram 2012:15).

Presuming this level of literary competence is transferable to a second language, pupils should also be able to achieve level 4 for English literature (van der Knaap, 2015). For use in this study, in Table 2., four literary competence levels and characteristics following Witte (2008) are combined with the description of levels for English comprehension according to CEFR. The level descriptions in Table 2. are applicable to vwo-pupils as literary competence level 1 is too easy, and competence level 6 as well as CEFR level C2 are too difficult at this stage of education and are left out. . Table 2. is based on Witte’s levels and corresponding competencies as a directive, with Hommersom-Schreuder et al. (2010), Hartog (2013) and van der Knaap (2015) for guidance.

In the next paragraph the research questions for this study are formulated.

Table 2. Literary competence levels and CEFR levels combined

LITERARY COMPETENCE		CEFR	CEFR	CEFR	CEFR
LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	A2	B1	B2	C1
L2	Simple text, close to perception of reader. Closed end.	xx	xx		
L3	More complex but transparent with deeper layer of meaning and mainly open end.	xx	xx	xx	
L4	No connection to perception of reader, more complex literary techniques, unpredictable development.		xx	xx	xx
L5	Complex literary techniques. Characters & theme are distant from perception of reader. (Historical) anomalous use of language and conventions.			xx	xx

2.5. Research questions and hypotheses

Adhering to theories that extensive reading is beneficial to most reading abilities (Krashen, 2004; Westhoff, 2008) and in the framework of the research project (Van der Knaap, 2016), assuming that the literary competence level reached by pupils in their L1 is transferable to that level in L2, inferred from studies about the relationship between abilities in L1 and L2 (Fecteau, 1999, Van Gelderen et al., 2007) my research question is: how strong is the relationship between the level of literary competence and the level of reading comprehension in English of vwo-5 pupils? This relationship is

expected to be strong because pupils who are better readers will probably estimate their literary competence level to be higher than pupils who are poorer readers. By a strong relationship a result larger than .50 is expected. As extended exposure to print makes pupils better readers this should co-occur with higher scores for a general reading comprehension test. Hypothesis 1: there exists a strong relationship between a student's literary competence level and his or her level of reading comprehension in English.

Secondly, pupils who received bilingual education such as TTO or intensified language teaching such as Cambridge English (CamE), in general do better at the final central school exams for English than Regular English (RegE) pupils who did not receive this extra tuition (Verspoor, M., De Bot, K., & Xu, X., 2015). Therefore hypothesis 2 predicts that pupils in the CamE class score higher on the reading comprehension test and on average will assign themselves a higher level of literary competence than pupils in the RegE class.

Girls are often considered to be the better readers. The results of PISA 2009 showed that of the 65 participating countries the gap between boys and girls with regard to motivation for reading is the largest in the Netherlands (OECD, 2010).¹⁵ As girls in general read more, they have an advantage compared to boys. Hypothesis 3: girls read more books and therefore have a higher level of literary competence and are likely to score better in the tests than the boys.

Finally, question 4 was formulated: which level of literary competence do vwo-5 pupils show when asking and answering questions about literary prose fragments in English? As reading books has become less prestigious and pupils nowadays read less books in schools as well as outside than before, hypothesis 4 was formulated. Hypothesis 4: pupils on average do not reach the required end level 4 of literary competence (Witte, 2008; Van der Knaap, 2015: 216).

The results reported in section 5. are based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of the tests. Next in section 3, the educational context of this study will be described.

¹⁵ Stichting Lezen, 2014:6

3. Educational context

3.1. Vwo English national exam regulations

At vwo pupils are educated in at least three languages, Dutch and English are compulsory, and student choose an obligatory second modern foreign language available at their school. In 2013 English became an official key subject in Dutch secondary education because the Dutch government considers it essential for completing higher education and for success on the labour market. Nowadays the methods that are used for teaching English in The Netherlands all have incorporated CEFR levels in the description of proficiency levels.

Although on the increase not all Dutch school offer bilingual education¹⁶, in many schools intensified teaching programs for most modern second languages are on offer.¹⁷ For English, Cambridge English is very popular. Cambridge English (CamE) is a communicative approach to teaching and learning English and assesses to which degree pupils correctly use English to communicate in real-life situations such as work and study. The CamE exams are aligned with CEFR – the international standard for describing language ability.¹⁸ Many secondary schools provide it, schoolwide or on a voluntary basis on top of the school's regular curriculum for English. However, all pupils have to partake in the national standardised final exam (CE) in order to pass English vwo. Since 2007 this Dutch CE for English is also based on the CEFR.

Being able to read well will make it easier for pupils to graduate from vwo because the central English reading comprehension exam accounts for fifty percent of their final grade. This exam measures general reading comprehension at a B2/C1 CEFR-level which is tested with questions about relevance and importance of aspects, relations within and conclusions about the intentions of the author in different texts (Meijer & Fasoglio, 2007).

The national requirements for the school exam vwo English literature are described in the next section.

3.2. English literature school exam

The other competencies for English as described by CEFR, e.g. watching and listening, spoken interaction, speaking and writing, are tested during school exams (SE). Literature is mostly tested as a subordinate part of these competences.

The national exam requirements for English literary education for vwo, also specified by Meijer & Fasoglio (2007), consist of three end terms. For SE literature vwo-pupils must be able: a. to

¹⁶ Tweektalig Onderwijs (TTO) in The Netherlands. TTO stands for a form of education by which schools teach some subjects in a foreign language, mostly in English.

¹⁷ E.g. *Anglia / Cambridge English* for English, *Goethe* for German, *DELF* for French, *DELE* for Spanish.

¹⁸ <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/>

give an argued account of their reading experiences of at least three literary works, b. to distinguish between literary texts and know how to apply literary concepts when interpreting literary texts and c. to give a general overview of literary history and be able to place the novels read in a historical perspective.

In a school context literary competence is generally described as “the ability to communicate about literature”, or ‘to be able to achieve meaningful reading experiences with literary texts of varying levels and to be able to express one’s reaction to these texts clearly.’¹⁹ As mentioned above, literary education is often seen as an ‘ill-structured’ domain. Therefore, the regulations are not strict and schools’ language departments are free in their choices with regard to approach and curriculum for teaching literature. Also different manners for testing pupils exist. For instance literature can be assessed by an oral and/or a written examination depending on the school’s program for final testing (PTA²⁰).

3.3. Focus on reading comprehension, diminishing reading literature

Literature could play an important role for achieving literary competency and other language skills, as well as enhance personal development. It is generally adhered to that a pupil’s reading is improved by extended exposure to print but the opposite is happening. Outside as well as inside schools pupils read less books than before and do not rate reading positively, ‘interpreting the mean attitude scores, we see that on average students in all grades of higher general and pre-academic secondary education do not think reading adolescent literature is useful’ (Van Schooten, De Glopper & Stoel, 2004: 363). Decline in reading books is ongoing (Witte, 2008; Witte et al. 2008 and 2009). In 2006, 65% of teenager occasionally read a book at home, In 2016 this has dropped to 40%, the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office reported ²¹

With regard to reading education, Westhoff (2012) distinguished between ‘mesten’ and ‘meten’. Instead of teaching to the test (‘meten’), by preparing the pupils for the final CE language exams using old CE exams, which many secondary schools tend to do, teachers should ‘fertilize’ (‘mesten’) the pupils’ ability to read by actually letting them read more books. Westhoff made clear that teaching to the test will not be beneficial to pupils’ reading abilities because what is measured in a CE English is a construct designed to test and discriminate between pupils’ abilities (Kwakernaak, 2013: 164).

¹⁹ as formulated by Dirksen, Bolscher, Houkes & van der Kist, 2004:175. My translation

²⁰ PTA stands for Program of Testing and Completions with regard to final school exam (SE) regulations.

²¹ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2212443-tieners-lezen-steeds-minder-boeken.html>

In 2015, SLO²² reported that the CE results for English have actually risen between 2010-2014. As possible explanation they mention the increased attention at schools for exam training which results in a disproportioned focus on reading comprehension for English as well as for the other languages taught, while this is only a part of pupils' reading ability.²³

Nowadays, there is strong support for using a 'doorlopende leeslijn', a continuous reading program from the lower grades to the upper grades that preferably builds on previous experiences of the reader and which also takes into account the literary competence levels of pupils as described by Witte (Kwakernaak 2013: 398). As Van der Knaap (2015) remarks, 'it is paradoxical that despite the focus on reading comprehension during the CE, so little attention is given to reading literature in either lower or upper grades while using literary texts in class can contribute extensively to pupil's reading comprehension' (2015:214). While "Stichting Lezen" has been promoting a continuous reading trajectory for many years, it seems that today, in many schools this approach is not yet well established for Dutch or for other languages.

3.4. Participating school's background

The school that participated in this study is a secondary school for havo and vwo (1400 students). There are four vwo-5 groups of which two are regular classes (RegE) and two are Cambridge English (CamE) classes. The CamE pupils are selected at the end of vwo-2 on the basis of their abilities and interest in English.²⁴ In the CamE classes the target language English is spoken during lessons which is not the case in RegE classes. The pupils who are now in a vwo-5 CamE class have received more hours of English tuition²⁵, as CamE is a complementary program on top of the regular English curriculum. No Cambridge English is taught in vwo-6. According to the English department there seems to be a decline in reading abilities in general. Moreover, not much difference in the results for the CE English reading comprehension between the two groups of English pupils is perceived. What changes in the curriculum could be made that will improve the CE results for English of all pupils is a major question for the English department at the school.²⁶

The method applied for teaching general English proficiency in the upper grades is Stepping Stones²⁷ in the RegE classes and Cambridge publications in the CamE classes. At the school no method is used to teach literature, instead self-designed literary readers are employed in the upper

²² SLO MVT vakspecifieke trendanalyse 2015.

²³ Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2014 cited in SLO MVT vakspecifieke trendanalyse 2015.

²⁴ Parents pay a fee for their children to receive the extra Cambridge English tuition.

²⁵ Pupils chose CAE and started with it in vwo-3, receiving one extra hour of tuition per week, amounting to approximately 120 hours over three years.

²⁶ Remarks made by English teachers during conversation MS1 summer 2015.

²⁷ Stepping Stones Noordhoff Uitgevers bv, Groningen/Houten, The Netherlands.

grades. In general the English language teachers at the school consider the materials used to teach literature to be of good quality. The literary reader for all vwo-5 pupils, '*A literary walk through the 20th century*', contains poetry from World War I and post-World War II prose fragments including genres like dystopia and science fiction. The fragments are presented with explanations and some literary concepts plus diverse questions for pupils, however, at present these materials include much text in Dutch and are not calibrated to CEFR or literary competence in levels as proposed by for instance Witte (2008) and Hommersom-Schreuder et al. (2010).²⁸

At present no continuous reading programs are adhered to in the school for foreign languages.²⁹ During schoolyear 2015-2016 a reader *Leesvaardigheid*³⁰ was introduced to prepare the pupils in their pre-nuptial year of education for the final English exams. One part of the school's PTA at the end of vwo-5 is a CITO-test based on a past CE exam. (Appendix P). This school, like many others, is 'teaching to the test' to improve CE exam results for English reading comprehension.

The teaching in vwo-5 of the literary reader '*Walk through the 20th Century*' takes about eight months of the schoolyear in the RegE classes where more time is spent on this project than in the CamE classes. There only five months are spent on the project as these pupils also complete exams for first or advanced certificates of Cambridge English. At the end of year 5, all vwo-pupils take a SE Literature exam about the content of the mentioned reader which also forms part of the school's PTA for vwo.

The other part of the SE Literature consists of an oral examination in year 6 about a modest reading file which besides the compulsory three novels, includes some chosen informative texts. Altogether, in their pre-nuptial year much time and attention is paid to teaching reading comprehension as required by the country's CE, as well as to teaching poetry and prose fragments in a 20th century literary historical context as part of the school's SE. This school's literature exam adheres to the requirements as described in Domain E of the national vwo exam prescriptions.

In the next section the methodology used in this study is explained.

²⁸ Initially I intended to improve the reader by translation, calibration and adjustment of the texts and tasks, however, circumstances did not allow this.

²⁹ Pupils can make use of 'Lezen voor de lijst' in the school's library. For English in all upper grades a literary novel is read classically.

³⁰ Reading comprehension. Which focusses on text structures, reading strategies, different types of CE exam questions and idiom.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

In total forty-three pupils from two vwo-5 classes participated; seventeen pupils from a Cambridge English class (CamE) and twenty-six from a regular English class (RegE). The pupils, twenty-two girls and twenty-one boys, varied in age between 16 and 18 years old. The RegE class consisted of 13 girls and 13 boys and the CamE class of nine girls and eight boys. As mentioned above, CamE pupils have received on average 120 hours more English education than RegE pupils.

4.2. Materials : RCT / LRQ/ PT

For the first test, an English reading comprehension test (RCT) was designed based on the Dutch final central exam English CITO 2015-I. The pupils were given about 45 minutes to complete the RCT which consisted of five informative texts and 17 questions (see appendix A). The score value for each question was one, so in theory the participants could score a maximum total of 17 points. The texts and questions were selected using the psychometric data provided by the CITO-institute as a guideline.

After consulting the schools that participated in our research about their teaching materials which involve using past central exam material, we chose exam year 2015 period I for the design of our RCT.³¹ In accordance with the project's agreements and using the 2015-I exam's TIA (Test and Item Analyses) from the CITO-institute, we selected question with a high Rir-value and a medium P value (no more than five questions had a higher P value than .80). The Rir-value expresses the correlation between the item score and the total score of all the other items. The P value is a percentage between 0-100 which indicates the degree of difficulty of each question for the participants.

For the second test, a literary response questionnaire (LRQ) based on the level scale by Witte (2008)³², was developed to find out about vwo-5 pupils' literary experience and competence in Dutch and in English (see Appendix B). Besides general questions about their experiences with and interest in reading in both languages, the pupils were asked to score eight fragments with regard to interest, language and content of the fragments on a Likert-scale. Four fragments consisted of Dutch literature and four of English in order to find out differences in appreciation of the two languages.³³ For this questionnaire we selected four short literary fragments from English novels representing the CEFR levels A2, B1, B2 and C1 in combination with literary competence levels L2, L3, L4 and L5. For the LRQ

³¹ Laura Broeders and Jolanda Oldenburg designed the RCT, LRQ and PT tests for English together.

³² Ewout van der Knaap created and supplied the outline for the LRQ.

³³ Input Dutch fragments was provided by Pryanka Ramoutar.

we selected literary English fragments with characteristics according to Table 2 on p. 12. Based on Witte's descriptions of levels it was summarized that a fragment at L2 should appeal to readers emotions and expectations. A text at L3 levels should include themes and philosophical aspects and at level 4 a literary text should also involve global perspectives and style figures while in a fragment at level 5 the cultural and historical context should interest a reader of that level. More elaborate justification for choosing the selected fragments can be found in Appendix B2. The literary fragments in the LRQ were not offered in a sequence of climbing literary difficulty but levels were scrambled deliberately.

As final part of the LRQ the pupils were asked to carefully read the descriptions of the six levels of literary competence before indicating the level that most closely described their personal level of literary competence.

A third test, the Prose fragment test (PT) was designed for two reasons: a. to be able to confirm the self-assessed levels of literary competence of the pupils by having them answer questions about literary fragments with climbing levels of literary complexity, and b. to find out whether the type of questions they asked themselves about the literary fragments are indicative of their literary competence levels. The prose test (PT), consisted of five longer literary fragments selected from novels in the same way as the fragments for the LRQ using Witte's descriptions as in Table 2. This time the fragments were presented with a climbing degree of level of competence. (Appendix C).

During the PT the pupils asked and answered questions about the literary fragments. The first question the pupils were asked about each literary fragment was to formulate three questions they considered themselves worthwhile to investigate. This extra dimension to the test was motivated by Janssen (2002) and Janssen & Braaksma (2007) to reveal the type of questions asked by pupils of a certain level of literary competency on Witte's developmental scale. Prior to the test pupils had no experience with self-questioning of literary texts as strategy.

In addition we designed two more questions about each prose fragment also with increasing complexity appropriate to the literary level of the fragment (see PT in Appendix C). As a control measure literary competence level 4 was tested twice to gather extra data as this is the required end level for reading comprehension for vwo-pupils. (See Appendix C2 for justification of chosen fragments.)

4.3. Procedure and analysis

After consulting the English teachers of both classes, the RCT and LRQ tests were administered during English lessons according to the lesson schedule. The RCT test lasted 45 minutes and consisted of in total seventeen questions about five texts. The LRQ took approximately thirty minutes to be

completed by all. The RCT's results were compared to the literary competence level indicated by the pupils in the LRQ in order to establish their correlation. The scores and answers for these two tests were further analysed and compared with regard to class and gender using t-tests.

For the PT two groups of six pupils were selected from each class based on the results from the previous two tests. From each class two pupils with an above average score, two with an average score and two pupils with a low score on the RCT and LRQ were asked to partake.³⁴ In total twelve pupils of mixed levels volunteered for the PT test which lasted 45 minutes. The test results were marked two ways. For correctness and completeness with regard to questions answered and also for type of questions asked. Results were analysed and summarized and literary competence levels ascribed to pupils' test results.

The three tests were administered to find out how strong the correlation is between literary competence level and reading comprehension and to discover which level of literary comprehension pupils in vwo-5 reach in English. Is intensified English worth the time and effort and are Dutch girls better readers in English than boys? In section 5 follow the results. The results were obtained using SPSS. See App. S for SPSS output.

³⁴ Selected pupils were asked to participate on a voluntary basis, however, some declined and were replaced by others with a similar score.

5. Results

5.1. Main research question: how strong is the relationship between reading comprehension and literary competence level?

First the descriptive statistics of all pupils together are looked at. Table 5.1. shows the results for the RCT of all pupils (n =43). The theoretical maximum score for this CITO-like test was 17. On average the pupils scored 8.47 points.

Table 3. Scores Reading Comprehension Test/ RCT³⁵

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total score RCT	43	11	4	15	8.47	2.91

Notable is that 26 pupils scored 8 points or lower which means they scored less than half of the maximum score (Appendix S: 42), resulting in a positively skewed histogram indicating more low than average or high scores (Appendix S: 43).

In table 4. the frequencies and percentages for levels of literary competence for all pupils are shown. With regard to literary competence levels (LC), the pupils scored themselves on average $M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.24$. Remarkable is that 17 pupils (39,5 %) assessed themselves at level 1. Again resulting in a positively skewed histogram (Appendix S:44).

Table 4. Output frequencies literary competence levels / LC

Literary Competence Level	Frequency	Percent
L1	17	39.5
L2	11	25.6
L3	7	16.3
L4	6	14.0
L5	2	4.7
Total	43	100.0

Hypothesis 1 predicted that a strong relationship would be found between literary competency and reading comprehension, strong meaning a correlation between 0.5 and 1. To obtain the answer to the main research question, the scores for reading comprehension test were compared to the personally assessed levels of literary competence of the pupils using a Spearman's rho test. The results show a moderately positive correlation of $r = .30$. However the nil-hypothesis, that no

³⁵ The word 'total proficiency score' was used in SPSS figures but should be understood as 'comprehension'.

relationship exists between the literary competence levels and the scores for reading comprehension of the pupils, could cautiously be rejected as the level of significance is $p = .05$ (Appendix S: 54).

When a Shapiro-Wilk test of normality (for sample sizes smaller than 50) was applied results showed there was no normal distribution in class 1 which is the RegE class, as the significant level is $p = .044$. However, in the CamE class the significant level was $p = .33$ and a normal distribution of data could be assumed (Appendix S: 46). The test of homogeneity of variance based on the mean of the reading comprehension scores showed that there is no equality of variance between the two classes.

Next the descriptive statistics of the classes separately are looked at.

5.2. Hypothesis 2: the Cambridge English pupils score better than Regular English pupils.

The second hypothesis predicted that pupils from the CamE class would on average perform better at reading comprehension and would generally estimate themselves at a higher level of literary competence than the pupils in the RegE class. The results showed that on average the pupils in the CamE class scored better for the RCT ($M = 10.4$, $SD = 2.91$) compared to the RegE class ($M = 7.2$, $SD = 2.05$). When compared in an independent-samples t-test, the results for reading comprehension of the RegE and CamE classes showed a significant difference, $t = -4.38$, ($p < .001$), however, equal variances could not be assumed as Levene's test showed $p = .036$ (Appendix S:46).

For reading comprehension (RCT) the histograms for the RegE class and the CamE class show the distribution of scores in each class.³⁶ The classes do not show normal distribution as both histograms are positively skewed, an indication that more pupils scored low than average or high. Both classes also shows negative kurtosis (CamE more so) meaning that the distribution of the scores is flat as can be seen in the histograms for the RCT.

Also regarding literary competence the classes' results differed from each other. The average literary competence level indicated by pupils in the RegE class was $M = 1.77$, $SD = .03$. For the CamE class these values were $M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.28$. The histogram for literary competence in the RegE class (Appendix S: 48) again shows positive skewness, indicative of the amount of pupils who assessed themselves at level 1 of literary competence in this class. In numbers 14 out of 26 pupils in the RegE class against three out of 17 pupils in the CamE class assessed themselves still at level 1 of literary competence. When compared to each other in an independent-samples t-test the results showed a significant difference in literary competence, $t = -2.971$ and $p = .005$ (2-tailed).

When tested independently of each other, using Spearman's rho, a difference with regards to the correlation between reading comprehension and literary competence level found between the

³⁶ The word 'total score proficiency' is used in SPSS, but should be understood as score for the reading comprehension test.

two classes. For the RegE class no significant correlation was found, however, for the CamE class the correlation found was $r = .78$ and significant at $p = 0.01$ level (2-tailed), (Appendix S: 54).

5.3. Hypothesis 3: Are girls better readers?

When the girls, gender 1, $n = 22$ and the boys, gender 2, $n = 21$ were compared the results showed normal data distribution. For reading comprehension (RCT) all boys ($M = 8.952$, $SD = 3.03$) seem to score better than all girls ($M = 8.000$, $SD = 2.78$), however, using an independent-samples t-test, the difference between the girls and boys from both classes together was not found to be significant.

Compared for gender in each class separately, the boys scored better for reading comprehension. See Table 5. In the RegE class the boys ($n=13$) scored on average $M = 7.615$, $SD = 2.80$, while the girls ($n=13$) in this class scored on average $M = 6.692$, $SD = 1.93$. In the CamE class the boys ($n=8$) scored on average $M = 11.125$, $SD = 3.09$, while the girls ($n=9$) scored on average $M = 9.889$, $SD = 2.14$. With an independent-samples t-test using split file, the data showed that the difference between the boys and the girls was significant in both classes. In the RegE class at level, $t = -3.18$, $p = .005$, and in the CamE class at, $t = -3.08$, $P = .006$ (See Appendix S: 52).

Table 5. Differences in scores reading comprehension test girls and boys in RegE and CamE class

gender	class code	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
girls	RCT (total score proficiency) ³⁷ RegE	13	6,692	1,9315	,5357
	CamE	9	9,889	2,8038	,9346
boys	RCT (total score proficiency) RegE	13	7,615	2,1424	,5942
	CamE	8	11,125	3,0909	1,0928

In sum, for all participants ($n = 43$) together the difference between genders was not significant but when each class was tested separately the results for reading comprehension of boys and girls in each class showed a significant difference in favour of the boys.

With regard to the self-assessed levels of literary competence all girls together scored themselves on average higher ($M = 2.318$, $SD = 1.08$) than all boys together ($M = 2.048$, $SD = 1.39$). In class RegE girls scored themselves on average higher at level $M = 2.077$ ($SD = 1.11$) than the boys in this class ($M = 1.462$, $SD = .8771$). In the CamE class both girls ($M = 2.667$, $SD = 1.00$) and boys ($M = 3.000$, $SD = 1.60$) scored themselves at higher levels of literary competence than the girls and boys in the RegE class. However, this difference between girls and boys was not significant.

³⁷ The word 'total score proficiency' is used in SPSS, but should be understood as score for the reading comprehension test.

With earlier results in mind further tests were carried out using other variables, for instance the number of books read voluntarily. On average the girls read more books ($M = 3.091$, $SD = 3.09$) than the boys ($M = 1.905$, $SD = 2.66$). A correlation test for gender showed that literary competence level correlated positively with books read voluntarily for both girls and boys (Appendix S: 55). Testing data to other questions from the LRQ could not account for differences in scores for reading comprehension between boys and girls. Also in this study girls have read more books and assess themselves accordingly on the literary competence scale, however, for the reading comprehension test the girls scored significantly lower than the boys in each class.

5.4. Results Prose fragment test (PT) to answer research question 4.

This section shows the results from the PT to answer research question 4: which level of literary competence do vwo-5 pupils show when asking and answering questions about literary prose fragments in English? It was predicted that on average pupils would not reach the desired level 4. Twelve pupils sat for the prose fragment test (PT), six pupils from each class. The PT was designed to check and confirm their self-assessed levels of literary competence of the participants.

The self-assessed literary competence levels of the participants varied between levels 1 and 5. Table 6. shows an overview of the results of the twelve selected pupils in the different tests. The pupils were given separate scores for the PT answers and the PT questions asked. The scores given were 'poor', 'average' or 'good'. Criteria to mark the PT were threefold. Did the pupil complete the test answering all questions (time factor), if not nc (for not complete) is added in the table. Secondly, did the pupil answer the questions correctly (poorly, average or good) in English or in Dutch (=nl added to table). Thirdly, how many and what type of questions did the pupil ask about each literary fragment (Appendix C3). Based on the results from the PT, how well were the questions answered and how well did the questions asked by the pupil fit the pupil's self-assessed level, literary competence levels were assessed indicating a lower, same or higher level in the last column of Table 6. Table 6. also includes a column with books read voluntarily.

After the PT three pupils were assessed a lower level, seven were assessed at the same level they reported before, and two pupils were assessed at a higher level of literary competence. Regarding the results of the 'questions answered', it can be observed that the pupils with lower literary competence levels (LC) and lower scores for the RCT, were not able to finish the PT within 45 minutes. However, most of the 'better' pupils did not finish answering in time either whereas others with lower scores on the RCT managed to answer all questions in time although not always correctly.

With regard to the 'questions asked', again Witte's descriptions of reader behaviour fitting to each level were used to be able to compare the questions by the pupils to their self-assessed literary competence levels. Witte et al. 2012, describes reader behaviour for each level, for instance, a

reader at level 2 ‘will search for recognition’ and ‘will check the text for (subjective) realism’. At level 4, however, the reader ‘will try to analyse and interpret the text’, ‘will have an eye for narrative and style’ and ‘will be able to use literary concepts’ (Witte, 2008; Witte et al., 2012, pp 19-23.).

Table 6. Overview of all scores of twelve pupils (in order of climbing literary competence level)

Pupil	Class	LC level Self-assessed	RCT- score Max. 17	PT Questions answered	PT Questions asked	Books read voluntarily	Assessed LC level after PT
143	CAE	1	6	poor / average	average	0	Same 1
117	RE	1	10	nl / average	nl / poor average	0	Same 1
123	RE	1	5	nc / poor	nc / poor	2	Same 1
107	RE	2	9	nc / poor	nc, partly nl / poor	2	Lower 1
122	RE	1	7	good	average - good	0	Higher 2
133	CAE	2	7	nc / poor	nl /average	2	Same 2
113	RE	4	6	nc /average	poor - average	10	Lower 3
131	CAE	3	15	good	good	2	Higher 4
136	CAE	4	14	nc /good	good	5	Same 4
116	RE	4	6	nl / good	good	6	Same 4
137	CAE	5	15	nc / average	nc / good -average	2	Lower 4
141	CAE	5	12	good	good - average	7	Same 5

nc = not complete, nl = in Dutch.

In Janssen 2002, a distinction is made between questions asked which mimic questions usually asked by teachers or the method used and authentic questions asked by pupils. ‘For the most part, students questions concerned factual details in the story (...) the questions appeared to be ‘inauthentic’ as the questioners already possessed the answers themselves’ (Janssen, 2002:97). An ‘authentic knowledge seeking question’ is a question a reader asks in order to make sense of a stories because a knowledge gap exists.

With regard to the ‘questions asked’ by the pupils about each longer literary fragment during PT it was observed that the type of questions the RegE and CamE pupils in vwo-5 asked were on the whole factual questions at levels 1 to 3 by which they searched for recognition, identification and explanation of the fragments. For example, ‘*Why has Edmund difficulty with trusting the beaver?* or

'Is Hasan the real brother?' (pupil 107). Or *'why do they have to leave the town?'* (pupil 113). Or *'Who was the girl in his former life?'* (pupil 122). Level 3 also involves themes and philosophical aspects of the prose and could be recognized in questions such as, *'is God important to their friendship?'* or *'Does Clarissa have troubles with her friend because of his aids?'* (pupil 116) or *'why does the teacher say: passing themselves of as martyrs?'* (pupil 131). Some pupils also wondered about historical contexts and the connectedness of the texts indicative of a level 4 approach to the fragment. Examples are, *'Why did they not learn about the Moguls?'* or *'In what way do the stories intertwine?'* (pupil 141). See Appendix C3 for an overview of questions asked by the pupils and an indication of the achieved literary competence levels. Correct interpretation of the level of the questions asked by the pupils was difficult and due to lack of time, doubts exist whether the ones asked are indicative of the pupils' literary levels.

The PT did not compare between genders but was designed to check pupils self-assessed levels of literary competence. On the whole it can be said that vwo-5 pupils are able to correctly assess their own level. The pupils' self-assessed level was on average $M= 2.75$. After PT assessment the literary competence level on average is slightly lower $M= 2.67$. Notable are the many level 1 assessments in this group of vwo-5 students.

In section 6 follow discussion and conclusion.

Conclusion & Discussion

6.1. Conclusion

Previous research (Schoonen et al., 1998, Fecteau, 1999; Van Gelderen et al. 2007, Grabe 2009) showed that being a good reader in a first language also has effect on one's reading abilities in a foreign language. Fecteau suggested that findings about the established strong relationship between L1 and L2 reading should be taken into account in research involving literary text (Fecteau, 1999: 486). As put forward by van der Knaap (2015), the relationship between reading comprehension and literary competency in English can also be researched applying Witte's differentiation model for literary development.

When tested at a secondary school with 43 vwo-5 pupils, the found data showed a moderately positive correlation of $r = .30$ ($p = .05$) for all participants in vwo-5 together. However the found data did not confirm hypothesis 1 which predicted a strong correlation of 0.50 or higher between levels of literary competence and the scores for the CITO-like reading comprehension test. When hypothesis 1 was tested in the two classes separately, results showed no significant correlation in the RegE class (n 26), whereas in the CamE class (n 17), the results showed a positive correlation of $r = .78$ ($p = .001$). From these results it may be concluded that a strong positive correlation exists between the two variables, literary competence and reading comprehension, within the CamE vwo-5 class although the sample was very small.

Next the results of the classes were compared to each other. Hypothesis 2 predicted that pupils from the CamE class would on average score better for reading comprehension and would on average assign themselves a higher level of literary competence than the pupils in the RegE class. This hypothesis was confirmed concerning reading comprehension and literary competence level as the analysed data showed significant differences between the RegE and CamE classes, however, the data did not pass the test for normality of distribution within the classes.

Besides the fact that the data distribution for the RCT was not normal, the reported results should also be interpreted with caution as test procedures were not always equally clear to all participants and also a difference in attitude towards answering the first two tests was observed between the RegE and CamE classes. This may have been caused by the teacher in the RegE class, who unlike the teacher in the CamE class, stressed the fact that the pupils would not receive a mark for the RCT. When pupils are not graded or do not expect to get feedback, they are less motivated to take a test seriously. This may have been a problem in the RegE class which scored remarkably lower than the CamE class for this test and it could also be a reason why the data in the RegE class were not normally distributed. The more obvious reason the CamE class performed better than the RegE class is probably that CamE pupils received more hours of English tuition than de RegE pupils besides being

initially selected in vwo-2 based on their proficiency in English and their motivation to study for extra Cambridge English certificates during three years. Results support earlier findings (Verspoor et al. (2015) that pupils receiving bilingual or intensified English perform better.

For the self-assessed literary competence levels distribution of data was normal and when the classes were compared to each other in an independent-samples t-test the results showed a significant difference in literary competence, $t = -2.971$ and $p = .005$ (2-tailed). It is remarkable that in the RegE class many pupils assessed themselves still at literary competence level 1. Perhaps correctly so, but this could also be due to an irregularity when completing the LRQ which occurred in this class. In the RegE class the LRQ was incomplete at first and a short extra session had to be held to complete the scores 'language' and 'content' for the Dutch literary fragments. Also some confusion about having to state their literary competence level for Dutch or for English occurred in this class. It can be said that assessments of literary competence were low in general, however the results show a mean difference of one whole level for literary competence between the classes.

Data to compare scores for gender did show normality of distribution. The analysed results present a difference in scores for reading comprehension between boys and girls. Although no significant difference was found taking the results from both classes together, when compared in each class separately, the boys were significantly better than the girls with regard to reading comprehension (RCT). The above contradicts hypothesis 3 which predicted that girls would do better than boys. The reported results confirm the national trend.³⁸

The girls' average literary competence level seemingly contradict their scores from the RCT for which the boys performed significantly better as on average the girls assessed themselves at a higher level than did the boys. The difference could not be explained by the number of books read voluntarily because on average the boys read fewer books than the girls but the difference was not significant.³⁹ Neither could the answers to other LRQ questions explain the differences found for reading comprehension between girls and boys. Although girls often read better than boys this is apparently not the case for English reading comprehension when measured with this small sample.

Combined the results seem to confirm the final hypothesis which predicted that in general pupils at the end of vwo-5 do not reach level 4 of literary competence. In this sample of $n = 43$, the vwo-5 pupils assessed themselves particularly low on Witte's scale of literary competence. With a literary prose test (PT) the literary competence levels in English of twelve pupils' were checked using a time factor. Based on the results from the PT, three pupils were assessed at a lower level than they

³⁸At the CE Dutch National exam for secondary education girls score higher for Dutch, boys for English and math's. Bron: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.

³⁹ Although number of books and level of literary competence correlates positively for boys and girls.

had reported earlier and two pupils were assessed at a higher level of literary competence.⁴⁰ Afterwards it was concluded that the Prose Test may have been too lengthy and that perhaps the factor 'time' played too large a role in the results. The PT almost certainly did not measure the levels of literary competence of the participants accurately as it proved very difficult to assign levels matching Witte's descriptions for literary competence to the 'question asked' by the pupils. Also the 'questions asked' seemed to lack 'authenticity' (Janssen, 2002), as they were mainly factual questions. As the pupils had no previous experience with self-questioning of literary texts, their questions did not show much diversity. In combination with the long fragments and also having to answer questions in the available time this part of the PT test may have asked too much of the participants.

The results from the PT also show that a high score for the RCT test does not necessarily result in a good score for the PT or vice versa. Reading informative texts in L2 and reading literature in L2 are not the same as reading literature asks more of students with regard to interpretation of the text. In Beach et al. (2011), it is mentioned that 'students range considerably in their reading ability within a class (...) students are often labelled as reading at a certain 'grade level' based on scores on standardized reading tests' (Beach et al., 2011: 45). The problem with such labels is apparently that pupils may vary considerably in their reading ability in terms of differences in type or genre of a text. The results of the PT seem to back up this observation as one of the highest performing pupils during the RCT (pupil 137) did less well in the PT and was assessed lower to level 4 of literary competence.⁴¹ However, the opposite result can also be observed, pupil 131 did as well in the RCT as in the PT and was therefore assessed a higher level of literary competence than self-assessed earlier.

In sum, as all participants were pupils at the end of vwo-5, initially level 1 of literary competence was left out (Table 2.) During the LRQ many pupils assessed themselves at level 1, therefore the average level of literary competence is low. Together with the results for the RCT which on average also show levels lower than the expected B2/C1 level for pupils at the end of vwo education (Witte, Rijlaarsdam & Schram, 2012:15) it can be said that on average the participants results would yield poor grades from their teachers.

Literary competency levels or CEFR levels are not exact numbers but may vary from minus to plus levels referring to somewhere in between levels of development (Van der Knaap, 2015: 213). On average the PT results seemed to confirm pupils' self-assessed levels but the test design gives reason to question it's validity.

⁴⁰ Despite careful marking this was done by just one person.

⁴¹ Later he admitted that he mainly reads for actual facts and does not like reading fiction much,

Results by Fecteau (1999) showed a significant relationship between L1 reading skills and L2 reading comprehension among more proficient L2 learners. Grabe said that ‘many if not most of the results of research on component skills that support reading comprehension will likely apply across L1 and L2 learner groups (except perhaps for beginning to low-intermediate readers.)’ (Grabe 2009: 449). The crux could be in the underlined sentences which refer to a threshold level before skills are transferable. Perhaps the reading comprehension and literary competence levels of many participants were too minimal to benefit them when reading in English? Fecteau also stated that L1 and L2 reading are not identical, participants comprehended text in L2 less well than in their L1 (Fecteau, 1999: 484). This point was also emphasized by Van der Knaap (2015: 214). Perhaps, therefore, the literary indicators which together describe the desired level N4 for Dutch literature are not directly transferable to English literature. More research into what a literary competence level 4 in English L2 would consist of is needed as many uncertainties exist regarding the exact literary and CEFR levels of appropriate prose or poetry in English (Van de Knaap, 2015:215).

Interesting results were found during this study but in conclusion it must be mentioned that procedures lacked consistency causing some doubts about the gathered data. Further research into the intriguing relationship between literary competence and reading comprehension should be undertaken looking critical at participants, materials and procedures applied in order to be able to verify how strong this relationship for English actually is.

6.2. Discussion

It can be said that in general the pupils were capable of assessing their literary competence level correctly when assisted by descriptions of the levels, as van der Knaap suggested. On average the pupils reached their self-assessed levels of literary competence but this was often not the required level 4 as desired from end vwo-5 pupils. Perhaps the many low self-assessed levels should not come as a surprise considering that in general the pupils had hardly read any novels.

For a long time it seemed impossible to assess each pupil’s literary competence level and to teach a pupil literature at his or her appropriate level of development, however, Witte’s differentiation model for literary development (2008) has provided a useful instrument for language teachers. The advantages of using such an approach to literature are that it enables teachers to differentiate between pupils as the individual literary development of pupils can be assessed and task can be adjusted to level. This approach also motivates the pupils to read as it allows them to make their own choices which books to read which increases pleasure in reading. Research has shown the willingness to read (intrinsic motivation) is largely determined by a belief in one’s own ability and the experience of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000, quoted in Stichting Lezen, 2014:27).

English is an official key subject in Dutch schools. Many English departments struggle with disappointing results for English final exams. Also at the participating school this is the case.⁴² No conclusions can be drawn about a relationship between the curriculum taught and the scores for English at the participating school. However, it can be said that the scores for reading comprehension on average were not high and were significantly lower in the RegE class than in the CamE class. Seemingly pupils receiving intensified English do better at tests and one wonders will this cause a two-way education at vwo for English?

Assessing themselves at lower levels for literary competence seems to indicate that the pupils had little experience with reading literature or books in general. In my opinion this English department should encourage and integrate the reading of novels chosen by the pupils themselves. As van der Knaap (2015) made clear a positive reading climate in school is essential and therefore a school preferably makes use of a continuous reading trajectory for Dutch as well as for modern foreign languages.

It is regrettable that despite the fact that 'Stichting Lezen' has been promoting a continuous reading trajectory for many years, it seems that today, in many schools, this is not yet realized. Although schools make use of the website www.Lezenvoordelijst.nl to support pupils' education of Dutch literature, it's benefits for teaching literature in combination with assessing individual pupils' levels is undervalued. Also many foreign language teachers do not yet seem aware of similar possibilities for teaching literature while available websites are facilitating tools for differentiation in the classroom and for making it more personalized.

As reading literature in L2 advances many competences that are shared with reading literature in L1, according to Van der Knaap these competences should be formulated in educational goals which can be reached depending on age and level of the students (Van der Knaap, 2015: 211). I completely agree and hope in the future to strive for changes in the daily practice, to include free voluntary reading in the classroom and to introduce literary education based on the developmental program for literary competence which would benefit pupils' reading comprehension more than the curricula for English reading comprehension and literature which are currently the custom in Dutch secondary schools. I also believe in teaching reading strategies such as asking oneself questions when reading and using think-aloud in the classroom so both pupil and teacher become aware of existing levels of literary competence and act accordingly. Literary education in a communicative and reader oriented setting, let's talk about books is the message.

⁴² Where no continuous reading trajectory for languages exist and English literature is taught front of class.

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