

Understanding and Text Properties: Investigating Readers' Sense-making Processes

Comprensión y propiedades textuales: investigar el proceso de interpretación del lector

Comprensió i propietats textuais: investigar el procés de interpretació del lector

Leonie Kirchhoff. International University, Germany. kirchhoffleonie@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2199-2099>

Judith Glaesser. Methods Center, Tübingen University, Germany.
judith.glaesser@uni-tuebingen.de
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6173-3596>

Abstract

Literary reading and the comprehension of literary text(s) have long been a key part of education. While reading comprehension in general has received a fair amount of attention, empirical research on comprehension processes of literary texts is still relatively rare. Yet, it is advisable to gain a thorough understanding of these processes, including potential difficulties and hurdles specific to the understanding of literary texts. To address this issue, we analyse such comprehension processes in a group of university students of English as a second language, drawing on a test based on Shakespeare's sonnet 43 which employs standardised, open-ended questions. Our research has two goals: firstly, to analyse readers' approaches that result in a more or less successful decoding of the text they are presented with, and, secondly, to explore whether different textual phenomena help or hinder understanding. We find that both strong and weak readers employ similar reading strategies; however, they differ in their literary response, with weak readers more likely to draw on irrelevant associations not warranted by the text. In addition, we show that some textual phenomena are more difficult to understand than others. Last, we discuss possible implications of our findings for teaching.

Key words: Literary comprehension, reader characteristics, textual phenomena, standardised test, Shakespeare.

Resumen

La lectura literaria y la comprensión de texto(s) literarios han sido durante mucho tiempo una parte clave de la educación. Aunque la comprensión lectora, en general, ha recibido bastante atención, la investigación empírica sobre los procesos de comprensión de textos literarios sigue siendo relativamente escasa. Sin embargo, es recomendable obtener una comprensión completa de estos procesos, incluyendo posibles dificultades y obstáculos específicos para la comprensión de textos

literarios. Para abordar este problema, analizamos dichos procesos de comprensión en un grupo de estudiantes universitarios de inglés como segunda lengua, utilizando una prueba basada en el soneto 43 de Shakespeare que emplea preguntas estandarizadas y abiertas. Nuestra investigación tiene dos objetivos: en primer lugar, analizar los enfoques de las personas lectoras que resultan en una decodificación más o menos exitosa del texto que se les presenta; y, en segundo lugar, explorar si diferentes fenómenos textuales ayudan o dificultan la comprensión. Descubrimos que tanto lectores fuertes como débiles emplean estrategias de lectura similares; sin embargo, difieren en su respuesta literaria, siendo más probable que los lectores débiles recurran a asociaciones irrelevantes no justificadas por el texto. Además, mostramos que algunos fenómenos textuales son más difíciles de entender que otros. Por último, discutimos posibles implicaciones de nuestros hallazgos para la enseñanza.

Palabras clave: Comprensión literaria, características del lector, fenómenos textuales, prueba estandarizada, Shakespeare.

Resum

La lectura literària i la comprensió dels textos literaris han sigut durant molt de temps una part clau de l'educació. Tot i que la comprensió lectora en general ha rebut una quantitat considerable d'atenció, la recerca empírica sobre els processos de comprensió dels textos literaris encara és relativament poc comuna. No obstant això, és aconsellable obtenir una comprensió a fons d'aquests processos, incloent-hi possibles dificultats i obstacles específics per a la comprensió dels textos literaris. Per abordar aquest problema, analitzem aquests processos de comprensió en un grup d'estudiants universitaris d'anglès com a segona llengua, fent servir una prova basada en el sonet 43 de Shakespeare que utilitza preguntes estandarditzades i obertes. La nostra recerca té dos objectius: en primer lloc, analitzar els enfocaments dels lectors que donen lloc a una descodificació més o menys reeixida del text que se'ls presenta; i, en segon lloc, explorar si diferents fenòmens textuais ajuden o obstaculitzen la comprensió. Descubrim que tant els lectors forts com els febles utilitzen estratègies de lectura similars; no obstant això, difereixen en la seua resposta literària, amb els lectors febles més propensos a recórrer a associacions irrellevants no justificades pel text. A més, mostrem que alguns fenòmens textuais són més difícils de comprendre que d'altres. Finalment, discutim les possibles implicacions dels nostres resultats per a la docència.

Paraules clau: Comprensió literària, característiques del lector, fenòmens textuais, prova estandarditzada, Shakespeare.

1. Introduction

The comprehension of literary texts has been an integral part of education for a long time. While there is a large amount of research on text comprehension in general (see, e.g., Fox & Alexander, 2009; Kintsch, 1998, for a cognition perspective; Leslie & Caldwell, 2009), there are far fewer studies (empirical ones in particular) of the understanding of literary texts specifically (Miall, 2006, though see, e.g., Hall, 2015; Kramsch, 1985; Paran, 2008; Witte et al., 2012 for examples of the few existing empirical studies on the topic). It is crucial, however, to develop a comprehensive understanding of these processes, including potential challenges unique to literary texts. To address this gap, our study investigates the comprehension processes of a group of university students studying English as a second language. Our research aims to achieve two primary objectives: first, to analyse readers' strategies that impact the effectiveness of decoding the presented text, and second, to investigate how various textual elements either aid or impede comprehension.

2. Background

2.1 Literary text comprehension

Literary and non-literary texts share many properties which shape understanding processes. The literary features of a text, as evident in its style and textual phenomena, sit along a continuum rather than adhering to a binary classification. However, literary texts do tend to differ from factual texts in the complexity of their linguistic makeup and the density of stylistic devices. This also includes textual phenomena such as ambiguity, paradoxes or metaphors.

In our paper, we hence focus on literary texts which provide us with intriguing research material based on their complexity: they pose challenges to their readers on the levels of language and style. Poetry in particular poses an additional challenge as poems generally lack context, which requires readers to process the linguistic information differently and more carefully than when reading a factual text.

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Our research project at Tübingen University in Germany focusses on learning more about the particular competences needed for the comprehension of literary texts. The case study presented in the following section(s) is based on a standardised comprehension test of Shakespeare's Sonnet 43

given to students of English as a second language (for details on the group, see section 1.4)¹. The text and the tasks presented to the students are in Appendix I. Prior to our own study, a quantitative study was undertaken based on the same test but with a different participant sample (Bauer, Glaesser, Kelava, Kirchhoff, and Zirker, 2022; see section 1.3)². In this paper, we present the results of qualitative analyses of the student responses to the same tasks obtained later from a different set of students comprising 70 respondents. The quantitative results provided insights concerning the association of text comprehension with student characteristics such as reading habits, prior experiences of studying Shakespeare and time spent in English-speaking countries as well as an analysis of the psychometric properties of the test. The short open answers to standardised questions lend themselves to an additional qualitative analysis in order to gain further insights into comprehension processes. Building upon the insights of Bierwisch (2012) and Klein (1977), who argue that the interpretation of poetry transcends mere analysis of text properties, emphasising its impact on the reader, our approach acknowledges that comprehension results from the intricate interplay between text attributes and the reader's predisposition. We assume that characteristics of the reader and the text both influence comprehension processes. Additionally, we draw insights from Witte et al.'s (2012) empirical study, which focuses on Dutch educators who, much like their global counterparts, are successful in teaching average students but encounter challenges when supporting diverse students, particularly in literary understanding. Recognising their limitations in identifying and classifying variations in student capabilities, Witte et al. (2012) aimed to establish an empirical framework that serves as a literary reference guide. To contribute to the existing research and to address the intricate interplay between text characteristics and readers' predispositions, our paper formulates a dual-pronged strategy: we firstly focus on how strong and weak readers (in the sense of how well they have understood the text) differ in the strategies they employ in their reading (see section 2), and, secondly, on properties of the text itself (section 3). Before presenting the results of these two parts of our analysis, we describe the text and the test based on it (section 1.2). We then provide a summary of the quantitative findings from the previous study (Bauer et al., 2022, section 1.3), followed by the description of the sample of students who participated in the present study and our approach to the analysis (section 1.4). We conclude with a discussion of our findings (section 4).

¹ The fact that the students were not native speakers of English obviously may affect the results; in particular, they may have struggled more with unknown vocabulary and phrasing. Against that, however, they are likely to have had a considerable amount of exposure to English-language literary texts through their studies, possibly more so than some native speakers of English who have not studied language and literature to the same extent. Either way, it would be interesting to see our approach applied to native speakers and readers from a diverse set of backgrounds.

² Details of the project members and the funding agency will be provided here once anonymous peer review has been completed.

2.2. Material: Shakespeare's sonnet 43

Shakespeare's sonnet 43 was chosen as the literary text underlying our test for several reasons. Poems are suitable for our purpose because they are relatively short and thus allow for the use of a full text rather than excerpts in a test situation. Moreover, they often contain a wide range of textual phenomena within their compact form. Sonnet 43 (reproduced in full in Appendix I) displays these properties, which pose challenges to understanding particularly for contemporary readers, as we shall

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see³. Based on the sonnet, a test comprising 15 items (Appendix I) was created. The items were standardised, i.e. all respondents received the same items in an open or constructed response format. In contrast to multiple choice questions, constructed response items induce test-takers to phrase their own answers to the questions and do not provide any preconceived answers that can be selected. While this increases the burden on test assessors, it also greatly increases the items' validity, given that they reflect the respondents' own thoughts. Another advantage is that, unlike multiple choice items, arriving at the correct answer by mere guessing is impossible (see Rupp et al., 2006). For our purposes, another key advantage is that constructed response items can be analysed qualitatively, thus offering additional insights into respondents' understanding processes.

The first group of items, focusing on line 1, aims at directly assessing understanding as well as gaining some insight into respondents' sense-making processes. The second group, addressing lines 5-6, explores the relationship between understanding specific expressions and the lines as a whole. The third group, with a focus on lines 13-14, investigates the understanding of the lines as well as the poem as a whole, that is, the move from a local to a global understanding of the text. 12 of the 15 items were considered in the final score, the other three items (1.2, 1.4 and 3.2) served to prime respondents for the following items. Students' responses were scored following a detailed answer scheme developed by the literary scholars among the test's authors who are experts on early modern English literature. Ambiguous answers were discussed with other team members until consensus was reached.

2.3. Previous research: quantitative findings

³ For more details on how the sonnet was chosen and on the rationale for test construction see Bauer et al. (2022).

An earlier quantitative study based on the test described above involved 430 students from three universities (Bauer et al., 2022). Nearly 60 percent of them were studying for a teaching degree, with the remainder pursuing a different course such as a BA or MA in English literature. Most of the participants studied a second subject alongside English; these second subjects were varied and included, among others, history, biology, German, other foreign languages, and sports. They had been studying for a period between one and thirteen semesters, with the majority (101 respondents, 23.5%) in their second semester. Bauer et al. (2022) found that the test showed satisfactory psychometric properties in terms of internal consistency and reliability. They also established its external validity by assessing the extent to which relevant respondent characteristics predicted test performance. They analysed the ability to reflect on one's own understanding by exploring the responses to items 1.4/1.5 and 3.2/3.3. Items 1.4 and 3.2 ask "Does the line make sense to you?", referring to lines 1 and 13 respectively. Items 1.5 and 3.3 then ask "If it [the line] doesn't make sense to you, please say what causes the difficulty. If it does make sense, please explain how you worked it out". In their answers, participants drew on context, noted an awareness of stylistic figures and literary conventions, as well as their knowledge of syntax and general world knowledge. Paraphrasing was sometimes used as a strategy. The main obstacles to understanding were a lack of relevant vocabulary, an overly complex sentence structure on the level of language, and struggles with a paradox (Bauer et al., 2022).

The current study builds on these insights by extending the research to a qualitative analysis of a sample of new respondents' characteristics and followed by an analysis of properties of the text. Respondents' characteristics and textual properties jointly contribute to understanding or a lack thereof. In the next section, we describe this new sample, and outline our approach to the analysis.

2.4. The present study: participants and coding

The test described in section 1.2 was taken by 70 respondents. Their overall backgrounds are very similar to the 430 participants described in section 1.3 (and in Bauer et al., 2022) in terms of their studies. However, they were slightly further advanced in their studies, with the majority in their third or fifth semester. Similar to the larger group of 430, responses were evaluated for overall correctness, and scores ranging from 0 to 10 were recorded, with a maximum possible score of 12. Following this quantitative assessment, we coded each individual response using the data analysis program ATLAS.ti, version 22.1.3.0 (Atlas.ti, 2022). The purpose of this coding process was to document and categorise any statements made by the students which provide information about their steps in the reading process, their interpretative approaches, difficulties in understanding, reading strategies and thought

processes. The resulting codes form the basis for the analyses presented in sections 2 and 3 (see Table 1 for a list of all codes). We accordingly documented all aspects of the students' reading process, irrespective of whether it was an instance of not-understanding, understanding, or simply reflections on the nature of the text at hand.

Some of the code categories were determined beforehand based on the aims of the survey, which were to reveal specific aspects of the students' comprehension processes⁴. Other categories were added or modified throughout the mark-up process, depending on what the students wrote in their answers in an inductive analytic process. After the initial coding rounds, the documents were checked again for further passages to which codes may apply that were added at a later stage of the mark-up process; we added the codes retrospectively wherever appropriate⁵. Appendix II provides details on the rationale behind the coding.

Subsequently, given our interest in reading strategies, we divided all codes into two groups, regardless of whether they had been determined beforehand or whether they had been derived during the inductive process: firstly, those that relate to the students' reading process and, secondly, those that refer to their literary response. While the reading process codes are related to reading more generally, the literary response codes mark those statements that reflect reactions specific to the nature of the textual material at hand. Thus, both code groups focus on the reader's behaviour, but the first encompasses general reading behaviour, whereas the second refers to the reader's response to the literary text at hand. There are three codes (hypothesis, text analysis, problem solving) that we assigned to both groups. Certain overlaps between the code groups were to be expected as we were dealing with the products of a comprehension process that requires readers to use basic comprehension skills and, simultaneously, to consider how the particular nature of the text affects this process. Table 1 provides a list of the codes and their definitions along with examples and information on which code group they were allocated to.

⁴ The questions in the survey are based on the assumption, founded in linguistics, that reading is an interplay between applying linguistic knowledge (of words, syntax, semantics) and determining how pragmatic principles are used in the text, i.e. identifying implicatures (Zirker, Glaesser, Kelava, & Bauer, 2018, p. 159).

⁵ We also used the software, which can generate a list of those words that appear most frequently in the individual codes, to verify the accuracy of our code categories. We expected the code "(evaluative) comment on: text composition" to include words, such as "repetitions" and "word play", that are likely to occur when talking about the composition of sonnet 43. Our expectations were confirmed: for example, the code "(evaluative) comment on: text composition" yielded the following words: word (23), meaning (15), shadow (14), repetition (13), whereas the code "problem solving" yielded the words: meaning (9), line (9), sense (7), sentence (5).

Code Name	Code Definition	Example	Code group
Ambiguity +	Recognising, highlighting and/or discussing ambiguity with regard to its possible meaning(s) in the sonnet	N/N/V/Adj/V (maybe N; I am not quite sure) (response to task 2.1.: asks students to name the word classes of the words in line 6: “shadow’s form form happy show”)	“reading process“
Ambiguity -	Not recognising ambiguity or not discussing ambiguity where it is present in the text	I think it is clear what the speaker means. (response to task 1.1.: concerns the ambiguity in line 1 of the sonnet (“When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see”))	
Realisation +	Knowledge growth through analysis, drawing conclusions (e.g. text elements are put in context) based on text analysis	He is talking about dreaming. (response to task 1.5.: concerns the paradox in line 1 of the sonnet (“When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see”))	
Realisation -	Drawing conclusions that are not supported by sonnet’s context, supposed understanding, expressing confusion about the meaning of a line	I don’t understand why he should see better if he winks his eyes. (response to task 1.5.: concerns the paradox in line 1 of the sonnet (“When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see”))	
Reflection on +	Reflecting on own understanding processes, self-monitoring, reflecting on context in which utterance in question was made	Paradoxically he is saying he can see most clearly when his eyes are closed the most, so when he is sleeping. This becomes clear by reading the rest of the poem with the motive of day and night. (response to task 1.5.: concerns the paradox in line 1 of the sonnet (“When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see”))	
Reflection on -	Understanding processes are not reflected upon even though this is supposed to be part of the response	I think the [sic] have a similar meaning and increase each other’s meaning. (response to task 2.3.: asks the words “shadow shadows” in line 5 (“shadow shadows doth make bright”) have the same meaning)	

Hypothesis	Establishing a hypothesis about the possible meaning(s) of the utterances made in the text	It probably is a reference to him missing his beloved and to be closer to her he closes his eyes and thinks of her. (response to the last task, 3.4.: asks students to go back to line 1 and state how it makes sense in the context of the poem)	both categories: "reading process" and "literary response"
Text analysis	Analysis of text elements and their relationship to each other	It is a paradox [sic] relation because usually one cannot see best while winking. (response to task 1.1.: concerns the paradox in line 1 of the sonnet ("When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see"))	
Problem solving	Descriptions of problem-solving strategies	After I translated the sentence, it made sense as a metaphor. (response to task 3.3.: asks students to explain how they made sense of lines 13-14 ("All days are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me."))	
Generalisation	Interpretations outside the text, overgeneralisations, general statements or inferences based on (inadequate) evidence from the poem	It is about seeing/not seeing/seeing only shadows or in dreams. It is about love and how the loved one is SEEN. (response to the last task, 3.4.: asks students to go back to line 1 and state how it makes sense in the context of the poem)	"literary response"
Personal associations	Meaning of word and phrases for the reader, does not necessarily coincide with meaning of the word in sonnet's context	It makes sense for me because for example [sic] my dad is wearing glasses and sometimes he winks more often to see something clear. (response to task 1.5.: concerns the paradox in line 1 of the sonnet("When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see"))	

(Evaluative) comment on: approach to literary text	Any comment regarding the question how to approach a literary text to make sense of it	In most poems there is not just one right meaning. Each of us reads it differently and associates different things. (response to task 1.3.: concerns the meaning of line 1 (“When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see”))
(Evaluative) comment on: text composition	Any comments concerning the text composition and the author’s skills	The syntax seems off and the [sic] are words of the same form but with different [sic] meaning or even exactly the same word [sic] right next to each other. This makes the poem very difficult to read but also intriguing. (response to task 2.6.: asks students what is striking about lines 5-6 (“Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright, / How would thy shadow’s form form happy show”))

Table 1. Codes and their groups

3. Strong and weak readers

As noted above, respondents scored between 0 and 10 points on the comprehension test. This part of the analysis focuses on the differences in approach between those who scored highly on the test compared with the others. Accordingly, we grouped them as weak readers and strong readers, with the former comprising those who scored between 0 and 7 points and the latter 8 to 10 points⁶. We assume that the two groups differ with regard to their reading processes and strategies that are applied to understand the text. Investigating these differences can help provide insights into specific comprehension processes. Accordingly, we were interested in potential distinctions in both the reading process codes and the literary response codes between the groups. Given that the overall score in the survey constitutes a measure of how well the student has understood the text, it is plausible that the processes through which the results were achieved vary between the groups, which is why we employ this differentiation.

For the analysis, we first examined the total number of specific codes given⁷. Next, we compared how often the codes from the “reading process” group were assigned. In Table 2, we show how many times a code was given on responses from “weak readers” and how many times to “strong readers”. For each group, we have ordered the resulting list of codes so that the most frequent codes are at the top of the table. In other words, we present a rank order of codes so that within each group of readers – weak and strong – the most common codes for that group are at the top of the table and the least common ones at the bottom. The reason for relying largely on rank orders rather than relative frequencies/proportions of codes within each group is that the latter can be misleading because the two groups are uneven in size. Reporting the proportion of each group within a code would be misleading. We have, however, provided the percentages of codes. The comparison of the “reading process”-code shows that the differences between these two groups of students are only marginal, regardless of whether rank order or percentages are considered.

⁶ 12 points was the maximum on this test. Respondents scoring at least 8 are those solving at least two thirds of the items correctly, placing them well above average performance. A lower cut-off would have made the characterisation of the top group as “strong readers” questionable.

⁷ Since a code is assigned to a response or part of a response, and since more than one code can be assigned to the same (part of a) response, the number of codes exceeds the number of respondents and the number of tasks.

Weak readers (58 respondents)		Strong readers (12 respondents)	
Realisation -: Language	197 (24.94%)	Realisation +: Language	51 (24.88%)
Realisation +: Language	132 (16.71%)	Hypothesis	32 (15.61%)
Hypothesis	104 (13.16%)	Text analysis	24 (11.71%)
Ambiguity -	58 (7.34%)	Realisation -: Language	22 (10.73%)
Realisation -: Context	50 (6.33%)	Ambiguity -	16 (7.80%)
Text analysis	47 (5.95%)	Realisation +: Context	16 (7.80%)
Realisation +: Context	44 (5.57%)	Reflection on +: Context	12 (5.85%)
Reflection on -: Language	41 (5.19%)	Reflection on +: Language	11 (5.37%)
Reflection on -: Context	37 (4.68%)	Reflection on -: Language	7 (3.41%)
Reflection on +: Language	32 (4.05%)	Realisation -: Context	5 (2.44%)
Reflection on +: Context	26 (3.29%)	Reflection on -: Context	5 (2.44%)
Problem solving	21 (2.66%)	Problem solving	4 (1.95%)
Ambiguity +	1 (0.13%)	Ambiguity +	0 (0%)

Table 2. Reading process codes, frequencies within performance groups

The fact that the differences between the two performances are only minor suggests that the students, irrespective of their competence levels, show similar reading behaviours, yet, apparently, with differing degrees of success, otherwise the group of strong readers would not have solved more tasks correctly. Moreover, the results also suggest that these codes are no direct indicators of students' literary competence; in other words, the general approach to reading – as opposed to specific strategies applied to literary phenomena – is the same for the group. Given that all our respondents are university students, it is perhaps not surprising that they have all developed similar general reading strategies. We have designated them as strong and weak readers in the context of our investigation, but in a different sense they are all strong readers, of course, given their level of education and their choice of university subject.

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We now turn to the more specific reading processes employed in the context of a literary text. Here, we do find some differences between the two groups, as can be seen in Table 3. Again, we present rank orders of codes and percentages within groups, as in the comparison of reading process codes.

Weak readers (58 respondents)		Strong readers (12 respondents)	
Personal association	46 (41.07%)	Generalisation	14 (46.67%)
Generalisation	45 (40.18%)	(Evaluative) comment on: text composition	9 (30%)
(Evaluative) comment on: approach to literary texts	15 (13.39%)	Personal association	7 (23.33%)
(Evaluative) comment on: text composition	6 (5.36%)	(Evaluative) comment on: approach to literary texts	0 (0%)

Table 3. Literary response, frequencies within performance groups

The strong performance group does not make any (evaluative) comments on possible approaches to literary texts, whereas in the weak group this is the third most common code. The personal association-code is also more typical of the weak performance group. Evaluative comments on text composition are the second most common code in the strong group and the rarest in the weak group. The results, therefore, suggest that the codes “(evaluative) comment on: approach to literary texts” and “personal association”, may, in the context of this specific survey, be said to be associated with lower competence levels, whereas the code “(evaluative) comment on: text composition” is more likely to be linked to higher competence levels.

A closer analysis of the students' statements in the passage coded with the “(evaluative) comment on: approach to literary texts” reveals, for example, that the students hardly answer the question in the task; rather, they comment on the fact that “poetry is hard” or that “it is a poem and everyone interprets poems differently”. It seems that, as a consequence of their own insecurity regarding the meaning of the line, the students often ignore the task altogether and come up with all sorts of responses. The code group “(evaluative) comment on: approach to literary texts”, therefore, mostly tags passages in which students avoid engaging with the text and making sense of it by stating what they should be doing or what they think makes the attempt to understand the sonnet futile. By contrast, a closer analysis of the statements coded with the “(evaluative) comment on: text composition”-code reveals that the tagged passages are often comments concerned with the fact that the elements in the sonnet are deliberately structured and phrased in a certain manner. Noting the text's striking use of language may have helped the students realise that, although, for example, Shakespeare's wordplay may be hard to understand at first, it nevertheless serves a communicative purpose – and that it is the reader's task to investigate their possible meaning(s) in the context of the sonnet.

Given the relatively small sample size, only further investigations can reliably confirm these tendencies. The results nevertheless allow for one conclusion: the difference between the results from

the two code groups suggests that the manner in which the students respond to the sonnet affects the outcome of their comprehension process.

This observation confirms the hypothesis that literary texts have specific properties that need to be taken into account when researching text comprehension and, thus, supports the notion stated at the beginning of this investigation: research on literary understanding requires an adequate consideration of the reading material (see, e.g., Frederking, 2010; Meier et al., 2017, 56).

Our focus in this section was on readers' characteristics, more specifically, their understanding processes in general and their literary responses in particular. We now turn to properties of the text which may aid or hinder comprehension.

4. Textual phenomena

The five textual phenomena which can be identified in Sonnet 43 and underlie our test are ambiguity, metaphor, oxymoron, paradox and polyptoton. As noted above, the density of such phenomena tends to be greater in poems because they are a powerful means to say "much in little" (Bauer, 2012, p. 160); this may contribute to the genre's enigmatic qualities and makes poems more challenging to understand. In this paper, we focus on two of the textual phenomena: the paradox in line 1 (referred to in task 1) and the metaphor in lines 13-14 (referred to in task 3). Both are commonly encountered in literary, as well as non-literary texts, and may hence be familiar to readers. The tasks contain questions which specifically ask students to reflect on as well as document (in writing) their own understanding process. The student responses to the tasks can thus be evaluated with regard to the textual phenomena they refer to. This approach allows us to investigate whether specific text features trigger certain comprehension processes. In sections 3.1 and 3.2, we analyse weak and strong readers together, returning to the distinction in section 3.3.

4.1 Making sense of paradox and metaphor

To begin with, we observe unexpectedly diverse responses for item 1.1, especially given the straightforward nature of the question (What is the relationship between part 1 of the line, 'When most I wink,' and part 2, 'then do mine eyes best see?'), which should hardly result in answers beyond those related to textual analysis. However, the students were apparently struggling to make sense of this line. In fact, despite their concern with the linguistic aspects of the utterance – the students mention a set of different problems mostly on the syntactical and lexical level –, they rarely noticed that the statement in the first line is contradictory and can only be explained when reading on: while most of the students correctly identified the metaphor in lines 13-14, only 12 out of 70 students

correctly identified the (apparent) paradox in line 1. In this context, it should also be noted that the fact that the paradox is resolved in the consecutive two lines should neither be considered a reason why students chose not to comment on it nor a factor that diminishes its importance for understanding the rest of the poem. On the contrary, the argumentative structure of the sonnet makes the first statement a plausible “expression of the speaker’s relationship with the addressee” (Bauer et al., 2022: 5). It is therefore particularly important to identify the paradox because it enables readers to discuss the meaning of the first line in relation to the interpretation of the rest of the poem.

This first observation is crucial as it reconfirms the importance of a thorough textual analysis preceding an attempt at interpretation. The student answers suggest that, whenever they are struggling to make sense of an utterance, they tend to resort to (inappropriate) remedial strategies that they think can help them resolve the issues encountered. The question is why their responses tend to diverge more when they come across a difficult passage than an easy one, even though the survey question asks them for an analysis of the passage that is supposed to help them find the cause of their problem in understanding. The lack of context may be one reason why respondents struggle to make sense of the utterances in the poem⁸. Unlike factual texts, fictional texts lack context in which to situate utterances, and the only clues as regards the meaning of an utterance are provided in the text itself⁹. In this context, Eco emphasises the significance of abduction (inference to the best explanation) in the interpretation process and proposes that interpreting signs entails formulating hypotheses and selecting the most plausible ones based on available evidence¹⁰ (Eco 1992, 65). The objective of

⁸ It makes sense here to include a short note on Iser’s 1974 book titled *The Implied Reader* in which he writes about reader responses to fictional texts. Central to Iser’s approach is a keen emphasis on the reader’s role in deciphering what remains unspoken in the text yet is possibly suggested (Iser *The Implied Reader* 274f). He thus introduces the idea of ‘gaps’ within the text, but, while still supported in literary studies, this is a somewhat vague concept. The definition of these ‘gaps’ is not based on a solid theoretical framework, such as, for example, pragmatic studies and the concept of implicatures. Instead, it appears that the determination of these ‘gaps’ relies on the individual researcher’s or reader’s subjective interpretation alone. One must therefore exercise due caution when considering Iser’s approach in literary analysis. A similar critique can be put forward against Rosenblatt who describes literary experience as “a circular process” during which “the reader responds to the verbal stimuli offered by the text, but at the same time ... draw[s] selectively on the resources of his own fund of experiences and sensibility to provide and organize the substance of his response” (Rosenblatt 1978: 43). In a manner similar to Iser, Rosenblatt places considerable emphasis on the reader’s role and overlooks the central importance of textual evidence as the primary point of reference. In this article, we aim to discuss the split between the reader’s subjective interpretations or free associations and the text’s semantic and pragmatic meaning (s. below).

⁹ To be precise, non-fictional texts are based on real-life events, and its readers can refer to additional sources in case of uncertainties and in order to disambiguate certain statements. Fictional texts, however, do not depend on the factuality of what they refer to and can therefore be considered a “self-contained unit” (cf. Bauer et al., 2020: 201). This independence requires readers to pay close attention to the poem’s language and how each meaningful unit contributes to the meaning of the whole (cf. Bauer et al., 2020: 201, 212; cf. also Bauer and Brockmann 2017).

¹⁰ See also Fishelov, who, based on the “ratio between textual details from various phonetic, syntactic and semantic levels, and explicit or implicit assumptions that we use in order to explain these details”,

understanding a fictional text therefore lies in discussing the textual evidence with regard to its possible meanings. However, while the information the text provides should be sufficient, it can still be challenging to figure out how the different units of meaning in the poem contribute to the meaning of the text as a whole (and vice versa). The complexity of this process becomes evident in the various remedial strategies the respondents employ to make up for the lack of context. For example, they try to establish a context themselves by drawing on subjective associations with certain words. While this strategy may be helpful when dealing with a factual text, in a fictional text, personal associations, e.g. with word meanings, can distract from a thorough analysis of what the actual utterance context of the linguistic expression (here, the sonnet) tells us about the meaning of the utterance. Consequently, the students end up proposing an explanation that has little to do with what the text actually says. For example, one student writes “[y]ou normally wink often when you are crying, therefore you can interpret it as the lyrical subject can see the truth, or clear [sic] when they are hurt.” Another strategy they resort to is trying to make the answer more specific by explaining how the utterance may apply to a situation in their own world. These interpretations are, however, often not warranted by the text. For example, one student responds to item 1.1 that “[y]ou draw energy for the following days. Through dreams our dark rooms can be bright.” We coded expressions of these two strategies as “personal association”. The two examples draw attention to the fact that there are two different kinds of knowledge that interact with each other during the reading process: the knowledge readers bring to the text and the knowledge they acquire from reading it. It can be challenging not to let pre-existing knowledge about certain words and situations influence how we understand texts. Hence, understanding the significance of context and how it affects word comprehension, especially when reading fictional texts, is a critical aspect of literary studies¹¹. Considering that there are more “personal association” codes for the paradox (see Figure 1) than the metaphor, we can assume that the students were struggling with the paradox in particular, making them rely more on their personal associations with the words rather than conduct a thorough analysis of the language.

The student answers suggest that, whenever they are struggling to make sense of an utterance, they tend to resort to (inappropriate) remedial strategies that they think can help them resolve the issues encountered.

distinguishes between economical and uneconomical interpretations (32f). While an economical interpretation “succeeds in explaining many textual details while using only a few, simple assumptions”, an uneconomical interpretation “develops a complicated set of assumptions to explain only a few textual details” (Fishelov 2012/13: 32).

¹¹ See also Meek’s monograph *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* where she explores various ways in which texts impact and mould readers’ comprehension and knowledge.

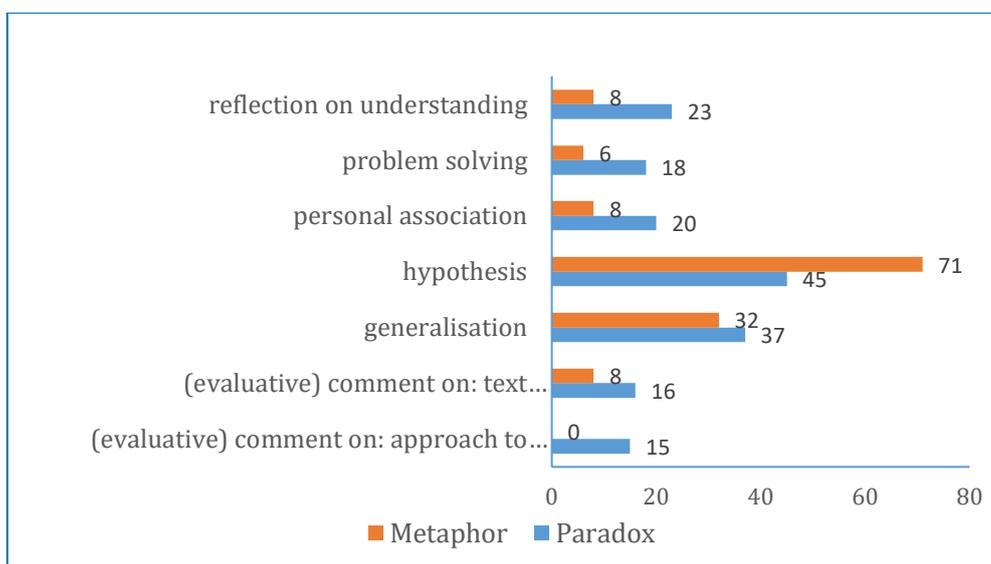


Figure 1. Distribution of “literary response”-codes for the textual phenomena metaphor and paradox

4.2 Reflection on one’s own understanding

Items 1.5 and 3.3 contain the same question applied to lines 1 and 13/14, respectively: respondents were asked to provide reasons as to why they thought they had understood this specific part of the sonnet or not. Again, we found that the students responded differently to the two phenomena. While 15 of the 21 codes appear with more or less equal frequency in responses to both items, four codes show considerable differences. These codes are explanation, hypothesis, problem solving, and reflection on understanding. A comparison of the results can be seen in Table 4.

Codes	Item 1.5	Item 3.3
Explanation	16 (28.57%)	8 (21.05%)
Hypothesis	7 (12.50%)	17 (44.74%)
Problem solving	15 (26.79%)	6 (15.79%)
Reflection on understanding	18 (32.14%)	7 (18.42%)

Table 4. Codes for items 1.5 and 3.3

We decided to analyse the respective responses in more detail and considered the answers to the items. We find that respondents report different strategies when making sense of the first line in contrast to reading the final two lines of the poem. In item 1.5, the students name five different strategies: they looked at the context, tried to re-structure the phrase, re-read the lines several times and tried to parse them word-by-word, translated the lines, and applied different forms of knowledge (lexical and world knowledge). Although the students claim that these strategies helped them make sense of the first line, they make fewer statements about what the line actually means. This is noteworthy as, in item 3.3, which asks the exact same question, the students list one strategy only, namely translation or paraphrase (again, we came to this conclusion by analysing the quotes directly)

and, more often, simply respond with a paraphrase of the lines rather than describing how they made sense of them.

Taken together, these differences in approaches to task 1 and task 3 suggest that the students were indeed less confident about the meaning of line 1 than the meaning of lines 13-14. In fact, their insecurity may have been the reason why they decided to reflect on their approach to the line/sonnet again rather than confirming their understanding of the line by paraphrasing it. Another explanation could be that a certain learning effect has taken place by the time the students arrive at task 3. We can assume that by then they will have read the sonnet several times and may have come to a general understanding of the sonnet's rhetoric. Nevertheless, the fact that hardly any of the students notice the (apparent) paradox in the first line as opposed to the metaphor in the couplet not only confirms our assumption that the students are struggling more with the paradoxical first line, but it also allows for another conclusion. It seems that knowing which aspect of the text makes understanding difficult can help during the comprehension process. Although our observations alone can hardly be considered reliable indicators that the students were struggling more with the paradox than with the metaphor, it nevertheless supports the notion that the metaphor may have posed less of a comprehension difficulty.

4.3 Paradox, metaphor, and readers' performance level

We would like to conclude this section with a brief comment on the relationship between readers' performance level and textual phenomena: the "personal association" code, as well as the "(evaluative) comment on: approach to literary texts" code, appear with higher frequency in the responses to the tasks concerned with the paradox. As we have shown in the first part of the analysis, both codes are associated with lower performance. These observations support the notion that, in this poem at least, the paradox poses more of a comprehension problem than the metaphor (this observation is borne out by the fact that the quantitative part of the survey showed that there are more correct responses on Task 3.1 (67%) than on Task 1.1 (56%)). In addition, they reveal an aspect of literary text comprehension that requires further investigation: when encountering a difficult passage¹², the students are much more likely to resort to remedial strategies that can lead to inappropriate and implausible interpretations when reading a literary text.

¹² In the case of the paradox, the difficulty is that the students are confronted with a self-contradictory statement that requires a thorough analysis of the context to be proven well-founded and actually logical.

5. Conclusion

Reading literary texts (and poetry, in particular) can be a particularly rewarding experience in many different ways. At the same time, however, their comprehension may pose challenges to readers. Therefore, it is important for researchers in the field to understand these challenges as a first step towards teaching this level of comprehension (more) successfully. With this goal in mind, we have presented an analysis of university students' responses to Shakespeare's sonnet 43 that were given in a standardised test of the understanding of this sonnet. It has proven fruitful to employ open-ended answers to standardised questions, since they allow for quantitative analyses (reported in Bauer et al., 2022, and summarised in this paper) as well as the qualitative analysis presented here. We were able to show that there are qualitative differences in the approaches of strong and weak readers. The former appeared to understand the poem better by employing strategies such as paying attention to textual features (as indicated by the code "(evaluative) comment on: text composition"), whereas the latter drew on their personal experience and generalised statements on the reading of literary texts which proved to be less helpful in understanding the text. Thus, our study has shown how important it is to be aware of the function of specific words, phrases and expressions, even or especially if these appear to be unusual or obscure.

Differences in comprehension arise not only from the individual respondents (their characteristics and approaches), but also from the text itself.

Differences in comprehension arise not only from the individual respondents (their characteristics and approaches), but also from the text itself. One of our underlying assumptions is that some textual phenomena are harder to understand than others, and, indeed, we found that readers struggled more to make sense of the paradox than the metaphor, as we noted in our analysis. This finding, however, invites further research which could use different (and more) texts to examine whether it is applicable to other literary texts, or confined to our chosen sonnet in particular. Similarly, it would be instructive to draw upon a wider and more diverse set of readers in order to make our findings more secure, and to explore whether different types of readers respond differently to the same textual phenomena.

Clearly, our study has some limitations. The sample size was fairly small, and the sample consisted of a very specific set of individuals: they were university students of English as a foreign language, and, as such, they were more likely to be familiar with, and happy to engage with, literary texts in English than most people. Further research with a more diverse set of readers is therefore desirable. Similarly, our study is based on just one text. While this enabled the respondents to immerse themselves in the text in some depth, it also means that we cannot be certain to what extent our conclusions apply to the same textual phenomena in different texts, and to different types of text including (literary) prose.

However, despite these limitations, we have been able to show how characteristics of the reader and the text may jointly shape comprehension. Both the knowledge of how different types of readers respond to a text and the knowledge of how different textual phenomena may pose challenges to text understanding are essential in designing approaches to teaching literary reading.

Both the knowledge of how different types of readers respond to a text and the knowledge of how different textual phenomena may pose challenges to text understanding are essential in designing approaches to teaching literary reading.

Based on our findings teachers, for example, may want to emphasise the particular linguistic makeup of a literary text and explain to their students how to approach a passage they initially do not understand – and how this differs from the way they approach such a passage in a factual text. One of these differences is that personal associations and experience are less likely to be helpful in understanding a literary text compared to a factual text, as noted above. Teachers, therefore, could stress that it may be tempting to use one's own subjective approach to a passage if it seems incomprehensible, but that without evidence from within the text this is not likely to help comprehension. Instead, students need to learn to pay attention to the meaning of a word or an expression in the context of the text itself, even if it appears to contradict their own experience. At the same time, teachers should be aware of the strategies students employ when approaching texts they find challenging. Anticipating not only obstacles within the text but also readers' reactions is crucial. The ability to differentiate, for example, between a tendency to generalise and an inability to process ambiguity is vital in the teaching of literary texts. Thus, we hope to contribute to the toolkit used by teachers of literary texts.

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7. Appendix I

As well as Shakespeare's Sonnet 43 and the tasks pertaining to its comprehension reproduced in this Appendix, students were presented with a set of questions on their course of studies, previous experience with Shakespeare, reading habits etc. We do not reproduce these background questions here due to space restrictions. They are available on request.

Please read the following poem:

William Shakespeare's Sonnet 43

01 When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see;
 02 For all the day they view things unrespected,
 03 But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,
 04 And darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.
 05 Then thou whose shadow shadows doth make bright,
 06 How would thy shadow's form form happy show
 07 To the clear day with thy much clearer light,
 08 When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so?
 09 How would (I say) mine eyes be blessed made
 10 By looking on thee in the living day,
 11 When in dead night thy fair imperfect shade
 12 Through heavy sleep on sightless eyes doth stay?
 13 All days are nights to see till I see thee,
 14 And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.

Task 1: line 1 "When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see;"

Item 1.1: What is the relationship between part 1 of the line ("When most I wink") and part 2 ("then do mine eyes best see")?

Item 1.2: Does the line have more meanings than one? yes no

Item 1.3: Give a reason for your answer.

Item 1.4: Does the line make sense to you? yes no

Item 1.5: If it doesn't make sense to you, please say what causes the difficulty. If it does make sense, please explain how you worked it out.

Task 2: lines 5-6 "Then thou whose shadow shadows doth make bright, / How would thy shadow's form form happy show"

Item 2.1 Read line 6 and then decide on the word classes of the phrase "shadow's form form happy show" and mark them accordingly (N / V / Adj...).

Item 2.2: Read line 5 and then decide on the word classes of the phrase "whose shadow shadows" and mark them accordingly (N / V / Adj...).

Item 2.3: Do "shadow" and "shadows" in line 5 have the same meaning? Give reasons for your answer.

Item 2.4: Paraphrase or translate line 5.

Item 2.5: Paraphrase or translate line 6.

Item 2.6: With regard to the form of lines 5-6, what do you find striking?

Task 3: lines 13-14 “All days are nights to see till I see thee, / And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.”

Item 3.1: Paraphrase or translate lines 13-14.

Item 3.2: Does line 13 make sense to you? yes no

Item 3.3: If it doesn't make sense to you, please say what causes the difficulty. If it does make sense, please explain how you worked it out.

Item 3.4: Going back to line 1: Explain if and how line 1 makes sense in the overall context of the poem.

8. Appendix II

	Code Name	Rationale
Codes determined in advance	Ambiguity +	Ambiguity is a common literary device, which is why spotting it in a literary text is likely to aid comprehension. Accordingly, this code was allocated if students noticed an ambiguity, such as that in lines 1 and 6 (tasks 1, 2.1, 2.5-2.6).
	Ambiguity -	Code was allocated if students <i>did not</i> notice an ambiguity, such as that in lines 1 and 6 (tasks 1, 2.1, 2.5-2.6).
Codes refined during the coding process	Realisation: Context +	Taking account of the context of the whole text can be expected to be relevant for comprehension, hence the a priori decision to employ a code to indicate whether context had been taken into account. During the coding process, it became obvious that the students sometimes state that they realized something, without being aware of the fact that they have actually <i>misunderstood</i> the meaning of the line. We therefore decided to distinguish between understanding and misunderstanding in terms of positive (+) realisations and negative (-) realisations.
	Realisation: Context -	
	Reflection on Context +	Before the coding process, the researchers assumed that the comprehension process requires readers to make constant context updates while reading, as these can help them recognise the functionality, for instance, of a textual phenomenon such as a metaphor within the text (Zirker et al., 2018, p. 160). Being able to reflect on this process is therefore crucial for comprehension, hence the category "Reflection on: Context". Again, it became clear during the coding process that readers were not always aware of their own lack of comprehension, so while they may have reflected on the context, the way in which they did so indicated that they had actually misunderstood the line. Accordingly, the code was divided into appropriate (+) and inappropriate (-) subcategories.
	Reflection on Context -	
Codes derived as part of the	Hypothesis	Readers propose an explanation which may be used as a starting point for further interpretations
	Text analysis	Readers analyze a specific feature of the text.

**inductive
analytic process**

Problem solving	Readers explain how they solved or attempted to solve a problem of understanding.
Generalisation	Readers make overgeneralised statements about something the text says, and, more often, does not say at all.
Personal associations	Readers include free-floating associations with words in the text that have little to do with what the text actually says.
(evaluative) comment on: approach to literary text	Readers comment on their own approach to the comprehension of the text.
(evaluative) comment on: text composition	Readers comment on how the author composed the text.