SUMMARY

This practice-based development research on the effect of literary conversations in the final years of primary school supports the creation of a continuous didactic line in literary development. The research also offers a course in literary conversations in years 7 and 8 of primary school, based on both theoretical and practical insights into the literary competence of pupils. In previous studies on literary competence (Witte, 2008; Van der Pol, 2010) experience is seen as a ‘stepping stone’ to further development. The present study shows that the expansion of experience is essential for development in other dimensions of literary competence.

The distinction made by Rosenblatt (1995) between aesthetic reading, reading a literary work by which the personal associations, feelings and ideas are being lived through during the reading, and efferent reading, reading a non-literary work to find an answer to a factual question in which personal feelings are pushed into the periphery, underlines the importance of personal reading experiences during aesthetic reading, connecting reader and text in such a way that a continuous interaction between text and reader takes place during reading. This reader-oriented view of reading is the basis for the present study on the impact of literary conversations on the literary competence of pupils in primary education. In Chapter 1 (Literary competence: text and reader), based on the insights of Langer (1995, 2011) on developing meanings in the reading process, it is shown that literary development is accompanied by the expansion of text worlds (or ‘envisionments’, as Langer calls them). These envisionments are formed by a coherent set of images, emotions, thoughts and questions that differ from person to person and are further developed during the reading process. Langer (1995) distinguishes four ‘stances’ in the process of meaning: ‘to be outside an envisionment and step into it’, ‘to be inside an envisionment and navigate through it’, ‘to step out of an envisionment and ponder about the experience,’ and ‘to step out of an envisionment and analyse the experience objectively’. This study adds the dimension of experience to the different views of the concept of literary competence, described in Chapter 1, stating that a literary competent reader, while reading literature, in interaction with and about literature, forms text worlds, experiencing, interpreting, evaluating and understanding the narrative. The four dimensions of literary competence – experience, interpretation, evaluation and narrative understanding – are explained in Chapter 1 and applied
to a literary development model for pupils in primary education in Chapter 2 (Development in literary competence).

This development model is typical in that it describes a development within these four dimensions and not, as in other literary development models (e.g. Witte, 2008), a development from one dimension to another. The insight that development takes place within each dimension emerged from a comparison of different literary development models with the development features of the dimensions experience, interpretation, evaluation and narrative understanding. The development models that are described have in common a development from reading without reflection to reading with reflection. The development, implied in those models, from text-oriented reading to reading that connects with one’s own life and with other texts, is worked out in this study in a development model at four levels. Langer’s envisionments, in conjunction with specific characteristics of other development models, form the basis for the four levels of development in literary competence: level 1, does not occur; level 2, occurs without argumentation; level 3, occurs with argumentation within the book; level 4 occurs with argumentation outside the book. In the model for literary competence of pupils in the final years of primary education developed here, these four levels are applied to the dimensions experience, interpretation, evaluation and narrative understanding. Chapter 3 (Promoting literary competence) argues that the social-constructivist view of learning is linked to the ideas of Rosenblatt (1995) and Langer (1995) on approaching meaning in literary texts, as discussed in Chapter 1. Interactions with and about the book form the starting point for the presumed development in literary competence in a course, specifically designed for this research, on literary conversations in years 7 and 8 of primary education. A characteristic feature of the learning process is the way in which interactions with better-informed partners create the zone of proximal development.

In Part II (Research into development in literary competence) the theoretical findings from Part I (Theoretical concept of development in literary competence) are incorporated in the set-up of this educational development research. The findings of Langer (1995, 2011) and Chambers (2002, 2012) on literary conversations inspired the design of a pilot study: a course on literary conversations in the last year of primary school about the book De Noordenwindheks (The North Wind Witch) by Daan Remmerts de Vries. The pilot study, described in Chapter 4 (Research approach), showed that interactions between pupils are not as smooth as supposed by Chambers. The lessons learned from the pilot were incorporated in a course, designed and implemented for this research, in which pupils of the final years of
primary school read and discussed four books during one year. The course design features a sequence from teacher-centred conversations (first book), shared control (second and third book), to conversations organized by the pupils themselves (chosen book). The implementation of the course provided the data to answer the general research question: How does literary competence develop in interactions with and about literature in pupils from about eleven/twelve years old and pupils from about twelve/thirteen years old, who, for one year, participated in the course “Literary conversations in the final years of primary school?” The data on the interactions with literature come from writing assignments by pupils on the books discussed: reviews, excerpts from a diary of one of the characters, and motivations for their favourite book. The data on the interactions about literature come from transcriptions of video-recordings of the conversations. The instrument developed to measure the dimensions of literary competence: experience, interpretation, evaluation and narrative understanding, the process of establishing validity and the instructions for supervisors are explained in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 (Findings) the results from the reviews, diaries, motivations for favourite books and conversation fragments are presented, and subsequently in Chapter 6 (Growth in interactions with and about the book) the results from the various data are correlated. The data on the interactions with literature show that pupils use more argumentation in all dimensions of literary competence, with the strongest growth in argumentation on experiences and interpretations. The development in interactions about literature is strongest in argumentation on interpretations; there is a decrease in argumentation on experiences; no conclusions can be drawn from the data on narrative understanding. The analyses of the questions from the conversation fragments show that during the course pupils began to ask more, and more varied, questions. During the course asking questions from a constructivist-interactional view of learning (Chapter 8.3) was brought to the attention of the pupils, which led to an increase in more profound questions. Chapter 7 (Process of literary development in the conversations) describes, on the basis of interpretations of the conversation fragments, the process of literary development in the conversations. The fact that pupils found it fascinating to share their reading experiences forms the basis for signification. Jotting down notes during reading about individual reading experiences turned out to be an effective aid in group discussions on reading experiences. Questions on the pupils’ own experiences were an effective trigger in the development of reading experience. In the argumentation on recognition questions pupils used argued interpretations of the behaviour of characters as well as of their own behaviour. When the behaviour of characters caused surprise or anger, pupils started looking for possible motives for this behaviour. This led to argued interpretations inside and
outside the book. Changes in perspective, time, or place of behaviour stimulated argued interpretations outside the book. The analyses of conversation fragments show that pupils use various interpretation arguments when arguing their experiences. For pupils the difference between experience and evaluation proved diffuse. Besides emotional evaluation arguments, pupils also used structural arguments about plot and use of language, and realistic arguments when comparing the text world of the book to their own world. Pupils showed narrative understanding with regard to books with special features, such as a striking plot or striking use of language.

Part III (Conclusion and discussion) answers the research question on how literary competence developed in pupils who participated in the course Literary conversations in primary school. The development lines that emerged from the course, as discussed in Chapter 8 (Conclusion), show that the basis of development in literary competence lies in experience. The development lines run from unargued to argued experiences and from unargued experiences to argued interpretations, reviews and narrative understanding. In addition, there are lines between unargued interpretations and evaluations. There are fewer data that suggest a relationship between argued interpretations, argued evaluations and argued narrative understanding.

A comparison between the different groups shows that pupils from about eleven/twelve years old develop stronger argumentations outside the book than pupils from about twelve/thirteen years old. The explanation offered is that eleven/twelve year old pupils appear to be more responsive to interventions in the educational process than the pupils of the last year of primary school who are concerned with other important things such as changing to another school. Section 8.2 describes a literary competent pupil in the elementary school and in section 8.3 the refinements of literary conversations are worked out further. The implemented course shows that experience is an essential dimension of literary competence. Furthermore, the course supplies additional information on the way experience, interpretation, evaluation and narrative understanding develop. With regard to the didactics of literary conversations this study establishes that literary conversations form the basis for development in literary competence. The constructivist-interactional view of learning is successful for the dimensions of experience and interpretation; the development into the dimensions evaluation and narrative need more inquiry. Although it was assumed that book choice had no effect on development, it appeared that book choice does affect argumentation of experiences or interpretations. The style of writing of Jacques Vriens, who writes exciting, recognizable adventures, lends itself to arguing experiences. Books in which there is a greater difference between
text world and the pupils’ own world, e.g. *Verkocht* (Sold) by Hans Hagen and *Bezoek van Mister P* (A visit from Mister P) by Veronica Hazelhoff, have the effect of engaging pupils more in thinking about interpretations. The conclusion is that literary conversations are successful for all pupils. Both boys and girls, good and less good readers, show development in their literary competence.