6
Readers Reading Literature

In this chapter examples are given of significant investigations into the reading of literature, including:

• the activities and processes involved in literary reading (reading poetry; reading short stories);
• possible distinctive features of reading of literature (as opposed to reading of non-literary texts);
• relative successes and failures in reading literary texts, and possible reasons for these;
• the special circumstances of reading literature in a second or foreign language.

Nardoccio (1992) and later researchers (see Chapter 3) show that readers with advanced literary training and/or extensive experience of reading literature do indeed read differently. This chapter begins by considering studies of expert literature readers reading, but goes on to look also at less expert and second language readers of literature. This information should be of interest to educators in itself, but is also intended to prompt readers to further investigations of their own circumstances of literature reading and their own students’ practices and problems.

6.1 Researching the reading of literature: cognitive studies

Quote 6.1 Ecological validity in research

As soon as we begin attending to reading, it stops, or becomes something else. This seemed even more true of ‘literary reading’. Our attempts to measure it seemed to cause it to evaporate.

(Hunt 1996: n.p.)
In a useful overview of research methods used in empirical studies of literature reading Steen (1991) notes the predominance of verbal reports research and strengths and weaknesses of this. It is self-evidently impossible to study reading itself, directly. Even ‘hard science’ methods from psychology or neuropsychology such as eye movement detection, or scans of electrical brain activity, blood flows, etc., are not studying ‘reading’ as such. They are studying activities involved in the reading process. Even these are subject to the kind of criticisms made in quote above. Research into reading has too often taken the form of insensitive experimentalism, which, in the jargon, ‘lacked ecological validity’. Whatever was being studied, it was often not ‘real reading’ (‘ordinary’, ‘normal’, natural reading). Usually, therefore, reading has been studied as mediated or responded to, notably verbally (oral or written reports, questionnaires), or sometimes in another medium (music, dance or film inspired by a story, drawings, diagrams of poems, etc.). Increasingly, the preference has been for qualitative investigation, though in principle, as Steen rightly argues, more quantitative testing could have been used to follow up more exploratory qualitative findings. ‘Comprehension’ of a literary text, it was suggested under ‘Assessment’, is not a straightforward construct. Other methods, as used by Zwaan, or Bortolussi and Dixon, described above, have included study of the effects of deliberate linguistic transformations of texts, or the effects of priming readers with different frames or levels of relevant knowledge before they begin to read a text, though again, the manipulations risk loss of the desired object of study. Hanauer (1997b), for example, finds better recall of surface linguistic features of the same text when presented in verse lines, than when presented as a prose paragraph. In terms of effective processing of literary text, studies by Nardoccio (1992) and others discussed above, show that experienced or ‘expert’ readers of literature read differently and gain more from their readings of texts as a result. Again, the work of Miall and colleagues represents interesting attempts to supplement more ethnographic reader response studies into affect (‘feelings’ aroused by literary experience) with more psychologically informed empirical research.

With the background of such studies largely established in Chapter 3, we turn now to consider some stimulating reports of research into the study of poetry reading, and of the reading of stories, to see what can be learned both directly (findings) and more indirectly too, in terms of research methods and approaches, including the reading of literature in a second language.