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# Connecting students and researchers: the secondary school student's voice in foreign language education research

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## ABSTRACT

The inclusion of student voice in foreign language research often relies mainly on a perspective that includes their voice as a data source, in spite of claims that the perspectives that include students as initiators should be at the fore. In this paper, the authors address the incongruity of this situation, arguing for a revision of current views. They discuss different conceptualisations of student voice in educational research, and argue that combinations of different perspectives on student voice provide unique insights that are necessary to develop our knowledge base. They then provide a detailed account of an empirical study in which an English as a foreign language (EFL) literature teaching and learning model was validated through collaboration and co-construction with secondary school students. They demonstrate the ways in which two different perspectives were combined within the project, resulting in a dialogical process, which then lends multidimensional support to the findings.

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Student voice; student perspective; foreign language teaching; secondary education; EFL

## Introduction

Despite the increasing interest in actively engaging students in research in subject areas such as sociology and education, in foreign language research students are either routinely excluded or primarily involved as objects of study (Pinter, 2014; Pinter & Zandian, 2014). However, excluding the voice of students from research leads to an incomplete picture of the educational system. Indeed, Cook-Sather (2002) argues that there is 'something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve' (p. 3). Such participation, however, is not self-evident (Könings, Brand-Gruwel, & van Merriënboer, 2005), and it was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the exclusion of student voice was noted by several educators and educational researchers (Cook-Sather, 2006). The prevalent image of students was, and unfortunately sometimes still is, as passive recipients of education determined by others (Lodge, 2005; for a brief historical overview see McCallum, Hargreaves, & Gipps, 2000). Remarkably, this is in spite of the student-centred approaches of pedagogues from the nineteenth and early twentieth century such as

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John Dewey and Janusz Korczak who implored educational researchers and teachers to 'listen to students and to be *alive* to their thinking and learning' (Dewey, 1933, p. 56).

The different ways in which student voice can be included in research have been described in a variety of typologies, which place student voice on a continuum from practically no involvement through to learner-initiated research. Typical of these typologies is that they are generally hierarchical, moving from lower to higher levels, and suggesting that rather than viewing learners as providers of data, more value should be placed on learners as initiators of research. However, the overwhelming majority of educational research in general includes student voice primarily as data providers, which is generally perceived as the lowest level (Pinter, Mathew, & Smith, 2016).

In this paper we extend the discussion of the inclusion of student voice in research in two ways. Firstly, we argue that the leading hierarchical ideas mentioned earlier and the prevalent current practice result in a mono-dimensional and therefore limited view of including the student's voice in research. We present different approaches to the issue and propose that including the student's voice from different perspectives will enhance research and will 'open up uncharted territories' (Pinter, 2014, p. 180). Our second contribution takes this theoretical position and provides a detailed example of a study in which this involvement was brought about, explaining how we integrated the student voice into the development of a model of English as a foreign language (EFL) literature teaching and learning in the context of Dutch secondary education.

In much of the literature the concern is either with learners who are children or with learners who are adults. In our own study the learners are teenagers and young adults (aged 15–18). Nevertheless, we use the generic term *student* because we believe that the underlying principles discussed in the literature and the issues we highlight apply to all age groups.

### ***The importance of student voice research***

Including student voice in the design (and re-design) of educational curricula can have a positive impact on the instructional environment (Brown, 2009; Könings et al., 2005; Vermunt & Verloop, 1999) because the way students perceive their learning environment has an effect on the way they approach learning and thereby the quality of the actual learning outcomes (Entwistle & Tait, 1990). However, how students and teachers perceive the instructional environment does not always align. For example, in a study where students' and teachers' perceptions of effective foreign language teaching were compared, Brown (2009) found that whereas students favour a grammar-based approach, the teachers favoured a more communicative approach to language learning. These significant discrepancies need to be addressed in order to avoid so-called destructive frictions (Vermunt & Verloop, 1999) and move towards a situation of congruence, a situation preferred by students (Vermetten, Vermunt, & Lodewijks, 2002).

An important distinction is made by Charteris and Smardon (2019), who emphasise that it is likely that students enact agency differently as a function of the type of discourse on student voice: institutionally focused discourses or learner-oriented discourses. Within institutionally focused discourses, which Charteris and Smardon (2019) identified as governmentality, accountability and institutional transformation and reform, student voice is used as a means to monitor effectiveness and quality assurance, focusing

on ‘the transformation of schooling settings to raise student achievement’ (Charteris & Smardon, 2019, p. 99). In learner-oriented discourses, however, students are active participators or co-researchers engaging in ‘student-teacher partnerships where there is a joint construction of knowledge’ (Charteris & Smardon, 2019, p. 102). This second type of discourse distinguishes learner agency, personalised learning and radical collegiality. In learner agency discourse, students determine their own learning, make their own decisions and ‘take action demonstrating command of personal, social and discursive resources’ (Charteris & Smardon, 2019, p. 100). A discourse of personalised learning describes the ability to recognise the voice of students in order to be able to make the connection between the learning process and each individual student’s experiences. And a discourse of radical collegiality suggests shared power relations where a student’s consultative participation is valued (Charteris & Smardon, 2019). It is with this type of discourse that we align ourselves in this current paper.

### ***Perspectives of student voice inclusion in educational research***

In 1992, Hart published an essay commissioned by UNICEF in which he reported a way of analysing the involvement of young people in society along a specific continuum. This so-called ‘Ladder of Participation’ diagram, designed to ‘serve as a beginning typology for thinking about children’s participation in projects’ (Hart, 1992, p. 9), consists of eight degrees of participation (including non-participation; see Table 1 Hart’s, 1992) typology has been uniquely influential, reproduced and adapted in different fields, especially public health (Funk et al., 2012; Moules & O’Brien, 2012), but also in the field of education, such as Wyse (2001), or as the object of research in Horwath, Efronini, and Spyros (2012). Hart’s typology has also been influential in adaptations that took a different angle, such as Treseder (1997), who developed a circular model (as opposed to Hart’s linear ladder) or Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, and Sinclair (2003), who proposed four different categories of participation.

Focusing on the field of educational research and reform, several of these adaptations have been developed over the years in order to understand the various ways in which student voice can be included. In Table 1, we present Hart’s original typology as well as four additional ones, which focus on secondary education. This selection is not intended as a systematic review or to achieve theoretical saturation, but rather as a comparison of a number of important typologies within the field of educational research and reform originating from different educational contexts in different countries (i.e. Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom) and developed at different times, over more than a decade (between 1992 and 2005). Lee and Zimmerman (1999) introduce their student voice continuum as part of the Manitoba School Improvement Program in Canada. Holdsworth (2000), a former secondary school teacher and researcher, discusses two arenas of student participation, namely school governance and curriculum development, in an Australian secondary school context. Fielding (2001) presents a student voice typology, exemplified by a longitudinal research project that took place in two secondary schools in the United Kingdom. And, finally, Lodge (2005) explores the value of student voice in school improvement. She first presents a matrix in which an approach to student voice can be analysed along two dimensions, which is followed by an analysis of three projects that took place in primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom. An

**Table 1.** Selection of typologies focusing on secondary education identifying three perspectives of student voice inclusion.

	Hart (1992)	Lee and Zimmerman (1999)	Holdsworth (2000)	Fielding (2001)	Lodge (2005)
Perspective 1: Learners as data source	Manipulation;	Passive (information source)	Speaking out;	Students as data source	Quality control;
Perspective 2: Learners in dialogue	Decoratation; Tokenism; Assigned but informed Consulted and informed	Active (participant)	Being heard; Being listened to; Being listened to seriously with respect Incorporating view into action taken by others	Students as active respondents Students as co-researchers Students as researchers (initiators)	Students as a source of information; Compliance and control Dialogic
Perspective 3: Learners as initiators	Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children Child-initiated and directed; Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Directive (designer)	Shared decision-making, implementation of action & reflection with young people		

analysis of these typologies reveals that each typology contains three distinct perspectives, which we have labelled: *Learners as data source*; *Learners in dialogue*; and *Learners as initiators*.

The *Learners as data source* perspective describes the inclusion of student voice as information-providing. Within this perspective, students get the chance to voice their opinion or understanding of a certain concept without the option of engaging in a conversation. The *Learners in dialogue* perspective, however, concentrates on the dialogue between students and, for example, researchers or teachers. Within this dialogue, students are valued as co-creators of knowledge. The difference between the *Learners in dialogue* and the *Learners as initiators* perspectives is that, in the first, the initiative is taken by the researcher or teacher, whereas in the second, the initiative is taken by the students.

Apart from Lee and Zimmerman (1999), the typologies presented in Table 1 are explicitly hierarchical when it comes to valuing the different perspectives. Hart (1992) distinguishes eight degrees, labelling the first three as 'models of non-participation' (p. 9) and the following five as 'models of genuine participation' (p. 11). Fielding (2001) also argues that 'the students as researchers mode is linked to a set of assumptions and values that are preferable to the other three levels' (Fielding, 2001, p. 137). Although less explicit, Holdsworth (2000) mentions that levels such as 'Being heard' can be used to give decision-makers the feeling that they are doing the right thing. That this sense of including student voice through so-called 'Tokenism' (Hart, 1992) seems to be the shared objection against the *Learners as data source* is exemplified by Lodge (2005) who suggests that when students' voice is included merely as a data source they become simply 'consumers providing feedback' (p. 132).

In contrast to the *Learners as data source* perspective, Hart (1992), Holdsworth (2000), Fielding (2001) and Lodge (2005) argue that what we have called the *Learner in dialogue* and the *Learner as initiator* perspectives do suggest some level of active and constructive involvement. This assumes that students have agency and are able to initiate their own volitional actions 'to change the terms and the outcomes of the conversation about educational policy and practice' (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 12). Fielding (2001), for example, considers his *Students as co-researchers* level as an opportunity for students and teachers to co-operate, acknowledging 'the legitimacy of both perspectives and [...] the necessity of their reciprocally conditioning joint pursuit' (p. 131). For Lodge (2005), just like Holdsworth (2000), dialogue is the highest form of involving students' perspectives because, she argues, 'through dialogue all members of the school will learn more about learning than they could have learned on their own' (p. 135). However, other researchers, such as Hart (1992) and Fielding (2001), argue that the highest form of including student voice in research is placing the students in the position of initiating researchers, the *Learners as initiators* perspective. A counterargument, however, is given by Lee and Zimmerman (1999) who argue that their Student Voice Continuum 'is not intended to suggest that all schools need to have students involved at the directive end' (p. 35) because 'factors of readiness, context, and resources' (p. 35) will have an effect on the extent to which students can be involved.

In the *Learners in dialogue* perspective, we will follow Lodge's (2005) definition of dialogue as a shared narrative, where through engagement, openness and honesty, participants arrive at a point they would otherwise not get to alone. Defining dialogue

this way links in with what Burbules and Bruce (2002) call a contemporary vision of dialogue in that it is 'egalitarian, open-ended, politically empowering, and based on the co-construction of knowledge' (p. 1102). According to Burbules (1993), two kinds of distinctions need to be considered when discussing dialogical situations: dialogue in its relation to knowledge and the attitude towards one's partner in dialogue. With regard to the first distinction, one can hold a convergent or a divergent view of dialogue. Within a convergent view, the dialogical process strives towards a particular epistemic endpoint whereas in a divergent view we observe the coexistence of plural meanings as well as ambiguous connotations. In the second distinction, Burbules (1993) defines a critical and an inclusive attitude towards one's partner in communication. A critical attitude emphasises a sceptical and judgemental position whereas an inclusive attitude focuses on understanding the outlook and experiences of one's partner. For example, an inquiry (where the aim is generally to solve a specific problem or answer a specific question) is regarded more critical and convergent, whereas a conversation is more inclusive and divergent, aiming for intersubjective comprehension (Burbules, 1993). Considering the fact that 'dialogue is not just one thing' (Burbules, 1993, p. 110), a careful selection of the form of dialogue should be considered depending on the goal of the dialogical engagement within the research project.

Contrary to the general view of student involvement within a *Learners as data source* perspective in both institutionally focused discourses and learner-oriented discourses (Charteris & Smardon, 2019), which sees such involvement as passive, we argue that providing data can in fact be construed as active and constructive engagement. In providing data without engaging in a dialogue students can make their own decisions and take action demonstrating command of resources (learner agency); individual student voices can be heard and a connection can be made between individual learning processes and experiences (personalised learning); and a consultative participation of students can be valued (radical collegiality). This does mean that whether student involvement in the *Learners as data source* perspective is construed as active depends to a large extent on how student voice is valued by the researcher and/or teacher; this in turn has an effect on the interpretation of the data.

Furthermore, with regard to the *Learners as initiators* perspective, students do not make a school alone. Schooling is a cooperation, not only between students, teachers and school leaders, but also educational specialists, researchers, policy makers and even materials designers. Privileging student-initiated research at the expense of, for example, teacher-initiated research seems somewhat arbitrary, and, moreover, incomplete and limited. We furthermore claim that the *Learners as initiators* perspective can arguably only be attained when the research topic is concrete, and students are in some way familiar with the topic. When topics concern more abstract notions such as pedagogical or methodological issues we can hardly expect students to initiate innovative research projects, let alone be dependent on this initiation. Consequently, we would contend that the additional value of including student voice in educational research is not the fact that students *initiated* the research, but the fact that their voice is regarded as an essential component. In other words, the three perspectives we have discussed – *Learners as data source*, *Learners in dialogue* and *Learners as initiators* – each bring unique insights and should therefore be regarded as compatible rather than hierarchical.

## **Foreign language-literature teaching research**

Foreign language-literature teaching, a term coined by Paesani (2011), is in the process of a curricular redesign worldwide. Ever since the Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages published a report in 2007 in which they advocated replacing the traditional two-tiered language and literature configuration with a 'broader and more coherent curriculum in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole' (n.p.), language-literature instruction has gained increasing interest worldwide. This is evidenced, for example, by the recently published companion volume to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2018). Although the first edition, which was published in 2001, included literature in its general descriptions, literature was only sparingly part of the can-do statements. In addition to leaving the explicit distinction between language teachers and literature teachers out, the 2018 edition also includes three new scales, which ideally should become part of the redesign of foreign language-literature curricula: Reading as a leisure activity; Expressing a personal response to creative texts (including literature); and Analysis and criticism of creative texts (including literature) (Council of Europe, 2018).

Although language-literature instruction is not new, research into this area is slowly moving from essentially theoretical and practitioner based research to empirical research. In order to move this area of research forward, Paran (2018) argues that we not only need more empirical research and sophisticated data collection and data analysis, we especially need more empirical research in the context of secondary education, 'the locus of most language teaching in the world' (Paran, 2008, p. 490).

## **Student voice in foreign language-literature teaching research**

Despite the increasing interest in actively engaging students in educational research (McCallum et al., 2000), in foreign language research students are primarily involved as data sources (Pinter, 2014; Pinter & Zandian, 2014). According to Pinter (2014) this is due to the prevalent experimental positivist research tradition within these fields. In a review study of research in foreign language-literature education, Paran (2008) discerned two types of research into students' views: large-scale research concerning the role of literature in foreign language courses and more small-scale research focusing on feedback regarding courses that included literary texts. Recent examples regarding the first type include a research project commissioned by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (Duncan & Paran, 2017), in which one of the research questions explored the views of students regarding the impact of literature on language learning. Bloemert, Paran, Jansen, and van de Grift (2019) also explored the views of secondary school students regarding their ideas about the benefits of EFL literature education. An example of the second type is Nguyen (2014), where students were asked to explore the pedagogical change on their learning experience with literary texts via a pre- and post-project questionnaire.

Although it goes without saying that student voice research in which student voice serves as a data provider is extremely valuable to our understanding of students, Pinter (2014) argues that 'it is essential that SLA [Second Language Acquisition] also widens its research agenda' (p. 168) with research that focuses on students as active research

participants where they are given ‘central and autonomous conceptual status’ (Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 481). This ties in with Charteris and Smardon’s (2019) call for research where young people are positioned ‘agentically as action-oriented individuals’ (p. 102). To our knowledge, in the area of EFL and literature teaching, no research has been conducted that focuses on learner oriented discourse with the students as active participants in a co-construction of knowledge. Our study aims to fill this gap.

### ***The present study: context, purpose and research question***

The current study is part of a larger research project exploring the teaching of literature in EFL classrooms in secondary schools in the Netherlands, where literature is part of the common core curriculum (for an overview see Bloemert, Jansen, & van de Grift, 2016; Bloemert et al., 2019). The larger project responds to the movement, within the global context of foreign language education, towards a re-integration of the domains of language and literature teaching (Carter, 2015). Even though the division between language and literature still exists in many contexts (Paesani & Allen, 2012), several frameworks have been developed to promote this integration (for an overview see Bloemert et al., 2016). Although these frameworks may be practical and valuable, we have previously claimed that most of them lack a theoretical foundation (Bloemert et al., 2016). Through investigating EFL classrooms in a secondary school setting and building on previous theoretical understandings we have proposed a Comprehensive Approach to foreign language-literature teaching and learning model (hereafter: Comprehensive Approach) (Bloemert et al., 2016, 2019). The term ‘approach’ refers to the focus of the EFL lesson where literature is used. Within the Comprehensive Approach we make a distinction between on the one hand the literary text as the focus of the study of literature, and, on the other, the student as the focus of the study of literature. When the literary text itself is the focus, a further distinction can be made between a Text approach (which includes the specific elements of literary terminology, text types, story and plot, and character development) and a Context approach (concerned with elements of biographical information and historical, social and cultural aspects of a text). When the student is the focus of the study of literature, a further distinction can be made between the Reader approach (whose elements are critical thinking skills and personal reading experiences) and the Language approach (whose elements are vocabulary, grammar and the English language development of students). Each of the four approaches is operationalised in underlying practical elements mentioned earlier. This model was empirically tested in a sample of 106 Dutch EFL teachers (Bloemert et al., 2016).

Even though the Comprehensive Approach was validated with EFL teachers and teacher trainers, when we presented this model (Bloemert et al., 2016) we pointed out in our conclusion that the empirical validation of the model did not include the voice of the target audience, that is, upper secondary school students. For this reason, we decided to further develop the model by including secondary school students’ perspectives through a learner-oriented discourse (Charteris & Smardon, 2019).

In sum, in moving away from the traditional polarisation in student voice research, the purpose of this research project was the validation of the Comprehensive Approach through two different perspectives: the *Learners as data source* and *Learners in dialogue* perspective. The *Learner as initiator* perspective was not included in this validation because our aim was to further develop and validate a foreign language-literature

teaching model that was the result of previous research. The lack of inclusion of the *Learner as initiator* perspective will be further explored in the Discussion paragraph.

The research question of this study was formulated as follows:

How and what can secondary school students contribute to the development of a foreign language-literature teaching model through *Learners as data source* and *Learners in dialogue* perspectives?

## Methodology

### Participants

The selection of the three schools for our project (School A, School B and School C) was based on convenience sampling: the three teachers who were involved in this study as part of their MA in Education research project were working in these schools as EFL teachers.<sup>1</sup> A total of 268 students participated in one of three activities (described in more detail later) in order to contribute their perspective in the development of our model: written reflective accounts (student age 15–16); unguided focus groups (student age 15–16); and a single open question survey (student age 15–18) (see [Table 2](#) for an overview).

### Data collection: methods

The data collection took place between September 2014 and January 2015 and consisted of the three different data elicitation methods described later, all of which took place in the students' first language (i.e. Dutch).

### Written reflective accounts

Because we were interested in the students' interpretation of the Comprehensive Approach, we asked students to translate the underlying practical elements of each of the four approaches into their own words. Since we were interested in *what* the students thought, that is, the *outcome* of their thinking rather than the students' actual thought *processes* while completing this task, we asked the students to reflect on the meaning of the elements of the Comprehensive Approach in writing. The students received an A4 sheet of paper listing the 20 underlying elements and were asked to write down, in their own words, how they understood each element. They were also asked to indicate whenever they felt the elements were not relevant for the EFL literature component. Importantly, this procedure allowed the students to take all the time they needed to express their views, thereby respecting individual differences (i.e. inclusive divergence).

**Table 2.** Number of students participating in research activities per school.

School	Teacher	Written account & unguided focus group	Single open question survey
A	A	4	29
B	B	4	32
C	C	–	199

### ***Unguided focus group***

In the next stage, we created a situation in which students would be able to construct a shared understanding (Lodge, 2005): the students' own written interpretations of the underlying elements served as input for an unguided focus group. Since our aim was to elicit the students' viewpoints and have them arrive at a shared understanding of the underlying practical elements (Berg & Lune, 2012) without influencing their thinking, the focus group was unguided, meaning that the researcher(s) were in the same room as the students but did not interfere in the process. Furthermore, similar to the written reflective accounts, we were not interested in the *process* but in the *outcome* of the focus group, so we asked the students to write down their group understanding of the elements and did not record the discussions that led to this group understanding. In contrast to the written accounts, we consider the nature of the dialogue established within the focus groups to be convergent and inclusive (Burbules, 1993).

### ***Single open question survey***

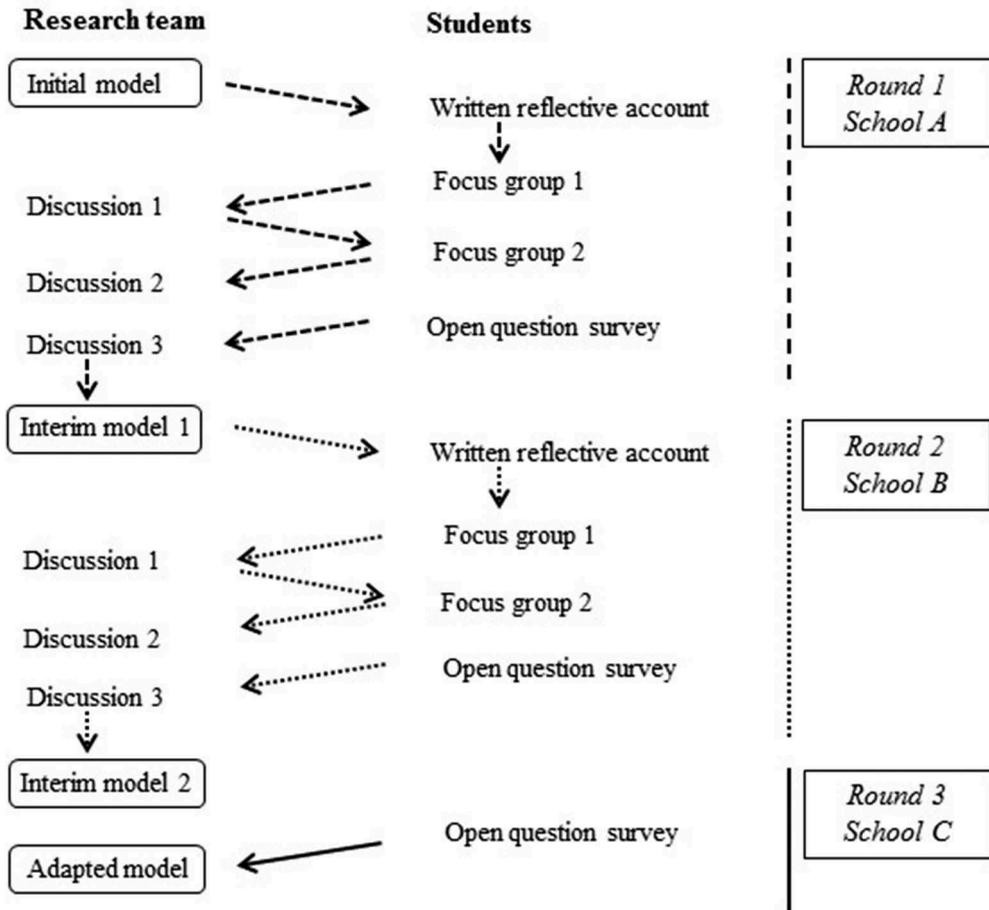
According to Cook-Sather (2002), it is the 'collective student voice, constituted by the many situated, partial, individual voices that we are missing' (p. 12). In order to include this *collective* voice, at different stages we asked three groups of Dutch secondary school students to answer the following open question: What do you think are the benefits of EFL literature lessons? The students wrote their answers individually and anonymously in bullet points on an A4 piece of paper (see Bloemert et al., 2019 for a detailed report). Our aim with this open question was to move the dialogue back again to a more inclusive and divergent situation (Burbules, 1993).

### ***Data collection: procedure and data analysis***

The data collection took place in three consecutive and partially iterative rounds and each school was engaged in one round. Figure 1 shows the activities and the interaction between the students of each school and the research team, which consisted of the first author together with the class teachers. As part of the research team, the class teachers were actively involved in the dialogical procedure described in Figure 1.

In sum, as Figure 1 shows, the students of School A were presented with the underlying practical elements of the Comprehensive Approach (which we refer to as 'the Initial Model') and participated in three consecutive activities. The output of these activities led to a refinement of the Initial Model (which we refer to as 'Interim Model 1'). The students of School B were then presented with Interim Model 1 and engaged in the same three activities as School A. The output of the students of School B (which we refer to as 'Interim Model 2') was then used to analyse the answers of the students of School C regarding the open question survey, which led to the final model (which we refer to as 'Adapted Model').

In Round 1, Teacher A first selected four students based on their willingness to cooperate outside school hours (convenience sampling), who were then presented with the Dutch translation of the underlying practical elements of the four approaches of the Comprehensive Approach (see Table 3 'Initial Model'). These four students were asked to individually write down their interpretation of the elements in their own words (i.e. written reflective account). The students were then asked to discuss their interpretations



**Figure 1.** Dialogical procedure of including student voice in the development of the Comprehensive Approach.

and arrive at a consensus (i.e. Unguided Focus Group 1). The output of this unguided focus group served as input for the first discussion and data analysis between Teacher A and the first author ('Research team' in Figure 1), which led to several adjustments of the underlying elements. Two days later the same four students were presented with the adjusted elements in a second unguided focus group, allowing them to validate our interpretation of the output of the first focus group in which they had taken part. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this kind of member checking increases the trustworthiness of qualitative research and it led to several minor adjustments. Next, a different Year 4 class in the same school was invited to individually write down their answer(s) to the single open question survey. Both Teacher A and the first author used the adjusted elements to code all the student answers individually. The third discussion and data analysis, which followed the comparison of the coding, led to a few more adjustments.

Round 2 was a repetition of Round 1 conducted at School B by Teacher B and the first author. Importantly, the input for this second group of four students was the list of adjusted

**Table 3.** Initial and Adapted Comprehensive Approach to foreign language-literature teaching and learning model.

	Initial Model	Adapted Model
Text approach	<i>Literary terminology</i> <i>Recognising text types</i> <i>Distinguishing text types</i> <i>Storyline</i>	1. <i>Literary terminology</i> 2. <i>Literary text types</i>  3. <i>Story, plot and themes</i>
Context approach	<i>Who, what and where</i> <i>Character development</i> <i>Biographical aspects of a literary work</i> <i>Information about the author</i> <i>Historical aspects of a literary work</i>	4. <i>Setting (role of time and place)</i> 5. <i>Characters</i> 6. <i>Biographical information</i>  7. <i>Historical, cultural and social context</i>
Reader approach	<i>Cultural aspects of a literary work</i> <i>Social and societal aspects of a literary work</i> <i>Overview of literary history</i>  <i>Literary periods and history</i> <i>Students' personal reaction</i> <i>Critical report of reading experiences</i> <i>Reading pleasure</i>	8. <i>English literary history</i>   9. <i>Personal reading experiences</i>  10. <i>Literary reading taste</i>
Language approach	<i>Critical thinking skills</i>  <i>English linguistic aspects in a literary text</i> <i>English vocabulary in a literary text</i> <i>Making reading miles to improve language skills</i>	11. <i>Critical thinking skills and personal development</i>  12. <i>English grammar and syntax</i> 13. <i>English vocabulary and idioms</i> 14. <i>English language skills</i> <i>(reading, listening, speaking, writing)</i> 15. <i>Language development and variety</i>

elements from the research activities that took place at School A. This repetition of Round 1 was undertaken in order to increase the validity as well as reach conceptual saturation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

In Round 3, Teacher C invited all students in the upper years ( $n = 199$ ) from School C to answer the single open question survey. In order to validate Interim Model 2, Teacher C was first trained by the first author. The training consisted of an in-depth discussion regarding the theoretical foundation of the Comprehensive Approach. This was followed by a practice session in which the answers to the open question survey provided by the students from School A and School B were labelled according to the underlying practical elements of Interim Model 2. After this training, Teacher C invited all students in the upper years ( $n = 199$ ) from School C to answer the single open question survey. The student answers to the open question survey from School C were coded by Teacher C and the first author. Interrater reliability was established using Cohen's kappa value (.839), showing strong agreement. The discussion that followed led to several minor refinements in order to increase mutual exclusivity (when elements were too broadly defined) and exhaustiveness (when elements were too narrowly defined). In order to make sure that these final refinements would not have a negative impact on the reliability of the coding, Teacher C and the first author coded the answers again, which led to a Kappa score of .923, again showing strong agreement.

## Findings

We first summarise the results, focusing on the students' contribution to the development of the Comprehensive Approach. Because the entire research project, which took place in three different schools and included 268 secondary school students, was very much an organic process, we then provide an illustrative set of responses for the three different data elicitation methods in chronological order: written reflective accounts; focus group; and the single open question survey.

### *Changes to the comprehensive approach made in response to student voice*

Table 3 presents the underlying practical elements of the Initial Model (Bloemert et al., 2016) as well as those of the Adapted Model (the result of the contribution of the students' voice). In order to be able to refer to specific elements as well as allow the reader to compare the two, we have numbered the elements of the Adapted Model.

The Adapted Model is the result of three types of changes. The first type consists of the most important contribution of the students' voice to this study: namely, where we added part of an element or an entirely new element. For example, in the Language approach we added the element *language development and variety* (Element 15), which was not part of the Initial Model. Furthermore, within the Language approach, we added the word *idioms* to the underlying element *vocabulary*. Such a change also occurred in the Reader approach, where the students mentioned personal development several times when talking about critical thinking skills, which we therefore added to Element 11.

The second and third types of change were minor, and fall into two types: ambiguous distinctions and verbosity/terseness. Most minor changes made belong to the former, an ambiguous distinction between two or more elements in the Initial Model. The Text approach elements, *recognising text types* and *distinguishing text types* were merged and changed into *Literary text types* (Element 2). Text approach element *storyline* changed into *story, plot and themes* (Element 3). And Text approach elements *who/what/where* and *character development* changed to *setting* (Element 4) and *character* (Element 5). Each of the three Context approach elements underwent a refinement of this order. The three Initial Model Context approach elements *historical aspects of a literary work*, *cultural aspects of a literary work* and *social aspects of a literary work* were merged into one element, *Historical, cultural, and social context* (Element 7). The students also indicated that there was an overlap between *biographical aspects* and *information about the author*. We therefore changed these two elements into *biographical information* (Element 6). The same was the case with Context approach elements *overview of literary history* and *literary periods and history*, which we changed into *English literary history* (Element 8). The final refinement of this order was a change from two Reader approach elements, *students' personal reaction* and *critical report of reading experiences*, into one: *personal reading experiences* (Element 9).

The other minor type includes changes that were made because elements were too verbose or terse. For example, the Language approach element *Making reading miles to improve language skills* was changed into *English language skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing)* (Element 14): this involved taking out the specifically Dutch (and possibly obscure) concept of 'reading miles' and spelling out the

language skills. The students also indicated that the phrase *linguistic aspects* confused them. We changed this into *English grammar and syntax* (Element 12), which they felt was an improvement. Another example is the Initial Model Reader approach element *reading pleasure*. When discussing this element, the students indicated that the word *pleasure* was somewhat misplaced. They felt that it was more about encountering different kinds of literature and forming your opinion about them. Therefore, we changed the Initial element into *literary reading taste* (Element 10).

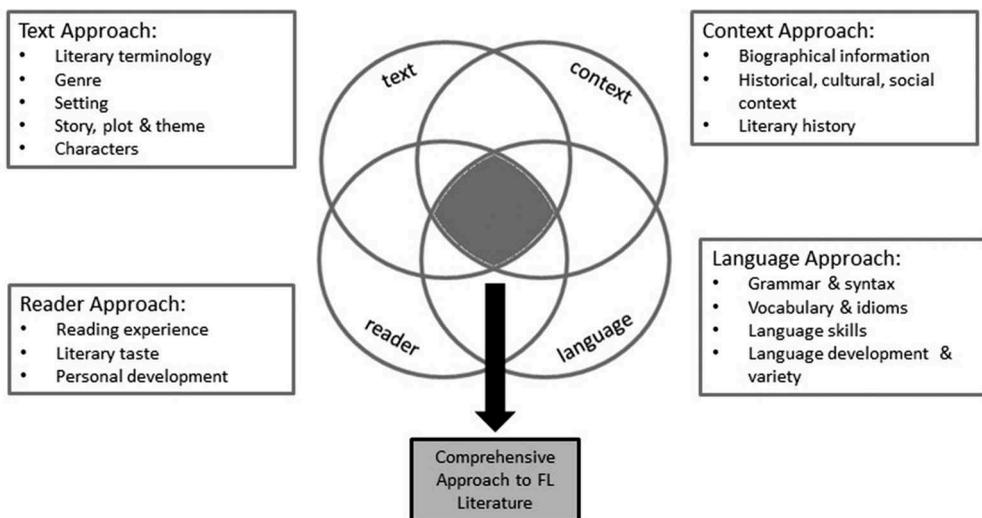
Figure 2 presents the Adapted Comprehensive Approach to foreign language-literature teaching and learning model including the underlying elements.

To summarise, almost all of the underlying elements of the Initial Model underwent a minor or sometimes more major change thanks to the input of the students (see Table 3). Whereas most of the changes resulted in a reduction of elements or simplification of the description of the elements, the most important changes were found when we added words or an entirely new element. The following section presents three detailed examples of what students contributed in each of the activities.

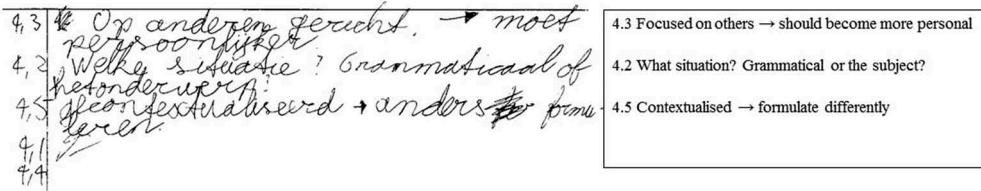
### **Illustrative responses from students**

#### **Written reflective accounts**

Figure 3 shows an example of a written reflective account of Round 2 at School B where one student wrote down in their own words how they understood the underlying elements of the Comprehensive Approach. The data presented in Figure 3 focuses on the Language approach. This particular student did not so much write their own interpretation of the elements but wrote down some suggestions. According to this student Element 4.3 had to become more personal and with 4.5 the word ‘contextualized’



**Figure 2.** Comprehensive Approach to foreign language-literature teaching and learning model.



**Figure 3.** Example of student output of a written reflective account at School B.

needed a different formulation. Furthermore, the student wondered about the situation mentioned in Element 4.2 and whether this referred to something grammatical or the subject. The student placed a positive tick at 4.1, which in Dutch education means that something is correct. Element 4.4 was not commented on.

### Focus group

Figure 4 shows an example of the output of the unguided focus group of Round 1 at School A where the students wrote down in their own words how they understood the underlying elements. The data presented in Figure 4 focuses on the Context approach.

The students in this focus group question, for example, the fact that in the Initial Model two Context approach elements focused on biographical information, which they felt was unclear. In the top row, the group has written ‘Biographical, what is meant by this’ and in the sixth row they came back to this topic, writing: ‘Again “biographical” is unclear’. Three of the elements were clear (2.2, 2.4 and 2.7), and the students actually provided their own example. The students also indicated that they felt that although 2.1 was clear, an example would be convenient.

### Open question survey

The single open question survey was administered at all three schools and a total of 260 students answered our question. Figure 5 shows the response from one student, who provided us with eight answers, of which the majority focused on the Language approach and some on the Context approach in our model.

## Discussion

The first part of our research question asked *how* secondary school students can contribute to the development of a foreign language-literature teaching model through the *Learners as data source* and *Learners in dialogue* perspectives. Our account here has shown how the three types of activities – written reflective accounts, unguided focus groups, and a single open question survey – focused on establishing an inclusive dialogue aiming for mutual understanding as opposed to a critical attitude that emphasises a sceptical and judgemental attitude (Burbules, 1993). Moreover, with the three activities we included both convergent (unguided focus groups) and divergent (written reflective accounts and the single open question survey) views of dialogue. The second part of our research question asked *what* secondary school students can contribute to the development of a foreign language-literature teaching model. As we showed in the previous section, the student voice had a major influence on our model of the Comprehensive

ITEM	OMSCHRIJVING / OPMERKINGEN
2.3	'Biografisch': wat wordt hiermee bedoeld
2.2	Duidelijk vb: Als es in een oude taal over ridders wordt geschreven kan het waarschijnlijk uit de Middeleeuwen.
2.4	Duidelijk vb: Veel feministische werken komen uit de vorige eeuw.
2.1	Duidelijk, maar handig als er een voorbeeld bij staat.
2.7	Duidelijk vb: In verschillende cultuurgebieden schrijft men anders, en heeft men andere meningen.
2.5	ook weer 'biografisch' is onduidelijk.
2.6	Duidelijk, maar 'sociaalmaatschappelijke context' kan onduidelijk zijn.

- 2.3 'Biographical': what is meant by this?
- 2.3 Clear. e.g. If a work is written in archaic and about knights it was probably written in the Middle Ages.
- 2.4 Clear. e.g.: Many feminist works were written in the previous century.
- 2.1 Clear, but convenient if it came with an example.
- 2.7 Clear. e.g.: In different cultures people write differently and have different opinions.
- 2.5 Again 'biographical' is unclear.
- 2.6 Clear, but 'social and societal context' can be unclear.

Figure 4. Example of student output after Unguided Focus Group 1 at School A.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correct Engels in de juiste <del>toege</del> wijze gebruikt</li> <li>• Uitbreiding op je <del>woord</del> vocabulair</li> <li>• Engels op de juiste cultureel wijze gebruikt</li> <li>• Culturele kennis van de taal</li> <li>• Uitspreken in het Engels</li> <li>• Wanneer formeel en wanneer informeel Engels te gebruiken</li> <li>• De verschillen in de taal over de tijd</li> <li>• De grammatica op natuurlijke wijze in te krijgen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good English used in the right way.</li> <li>• Expanding your vocabulary.</li> <li>• Using English in the right cultural way.</li> <li>• Cultural knowledge about the language.</li> <li>• Pronunciation in English.</li> <li>• When to use formal and informal English.</li> <li>• The differences in language in different periods.</li> <li>• Learning the grammar in a natural way.</li> </ul>
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Figure 5. Example of answers of one student regarding the single open question survey.

Approach, helping us to reduce the number of elements to 15, adding new elements but also combining different elements and resolving ambiguities. We now turn to a fuller discussion of these two elements of our study.

One of our main arguments in this paper is that the leading hierarchical ideas and the prevalent current practice result in a mono-dimensional view of including the student's voice in research. We also argued that the *Learners as data source* perspective is not so much passive but can be construed as active and constructive. We offer an alternative view that asserts a multi-dimensional stance in which both the *Learner as data source* and the *Learners in dialogue* perspectives are considered unique and complementary. The account of our research project demonstrates what this multi-dimensional stance looks like in empirical research.

Most importantly, because each of the perspectives offers a unique platform for student voice and therefore contributes unique and invaluable insights, they cannot and should not be compared, let alone be ranked. For example, integrating student voice through the *Learner as data source* perspective does not aspire to include students in its research design or analysis and should therefore not be judged as such. It could further be argued that because of their unique position, applying only one perspective of

student voice in research could be considered limited, showing just one side of the multi-faceted notion of student voice. When the *Learner as data source* perspective is, for example, combined with the *Learner in dialogue* perspective, several dialogues are established through which the collective as well as individual students can be heard (Cook-Sather, 2002).

Furthermore, despite the consensus established in previous research that the *Learner as data source* perspective equals consumerism and degrades the students as passive agents, we have argued that, at this level too, the students can fulfil an active role, contributing their valuable perceptions. The open question survey, though technically using the learners as data sources, created a safe space through facilitating sufficient openness (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) for a large group of students where they could take the time they needed to share their perspectives on the benefits of EFL literature education. This is an altogether respectful and active role far removed from the understanding of this perspective by researchers 'being suspicious of children's trustworthiness and doubtful of their ability to give and receive factual information' (Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 480).

According to Lodge (2005), a shared meaning of learning is established through engagement and dialogue because it 'prompts reflection, critical investigation, analysis, interpretation and reorganization of knowledge' (p. 135). The written reflective accounts, which created a legitimate and valued space (Cook-Sather, 2002) for the students to think about, to question, and to reconsider their interpretations of the underlying elements of the Comprehensive Approach, together with the output of the unguided focus groups created dialogical processes of knowledge production between the students and the research team. The power of presenting the students with our interpretation of the output of their focus group dialogue in the form of asking them to discuss the revised underlying elements lies in the open acknowledgement, to them, of the legitimacy of their voice, and showed an overt interdependence. The open question survey was to some extent also part of this dialogue since these answers fuelled the dialogue in the research team of which the output was presented in the following focus group.

Figure 1 emphasises how the collaboration between the students and the research team was a joint process of knowledge production leading to a better understanding of the underlying elements (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) and therefore of the model as a whole. The combination of the three different data elicitation methods created a certain stichomythic form, a rhythmic intensity of alternating turns in which both the students and the research team engaged in convergent and divergent inclusive forms of dialogue (Burbules, 1993). Each dialogical step was a constructive continuation of the previous one, questioning and discussing the output of the preceding step and thereby further developing the model through collective knowledge building.

Turning to the contribution of the student voice to our model, comparing the Initial and Adapted versions of the Comprehensive Approach (Table 3) it becomes clear that secondary school students can offer valuable insights in developing a model for teaching and learning through collaboration and co-construction. By eliciting the students' voice regarding our Initial Model, the most important contribution was where they felt the underlying elements were incomplete or lacking altogether. Furthermore, as we have shown in Table 3, apart from the first Text approach element, *literary terminology*, all the other elements underwent a change. There were six cases where we changed the

description of the Initial element and five instances where we merged either two or three elements into one. Whenever students indicated that the Initial elements were ambiguous or confusing or when certain words were misplaced, we adjusted the elements based on their suggestions, thereby ensuring a clearer formulation. Through these additions and changes, the students helped us shape and define our model by showing us how they view EFL literature education within the boundaries of the Initial Model. In other words, through learner-oriented discourses (Charteris & Smardon, 2019) the students' contributions did indeed have a constructive and unique impact on the development of our model. Importantly, our final model is a model which we could not have reached on our own – one of the points Lodge (2005) makes in her definition of dialogue, referred to in our opening sections.

Despite our carefully constructed dialogical research process with 'the collective student', this process did not directly involve the *Learner as initiators* perspective. Although including this perspective was not considered relevant because we were interested in further developing existing frameworks that lacked a theoretical foundation as well as empirical validation, what we could have done in retrospect to improve this project was to include this perspective of student voice when designing the actual research process and research activities. The students could have opened up uncharted territories (Pinter, 2014) by designing refreshing research activities from their own unique points of view. Or as one of the participants in an IATEFL webinar (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) on researching with children (Pinter, Kuchah, & Smith, 2013) wondered: 'If we put students in the centre of learning, why should we not put them in the centre of research projects as well?' (p. 486).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the different perspectives in which secondary school students can be constructively involved in research projects, thereby adding to the body of empirical research in secondary foreign language-literature teaching as well as research into learner oriented discourses. Including the student's voice in refining the underlying elements of the Comprehensive Approach can be beneficial for FL teachers who wish to align the way the instructional environment is perceived by their students and by themselves because alignment can only be achieved when students and teachers have a very clear and unambiguous understanding of the underlying elements.

Through our study, we have argued that the prevailing understanding that including student voice through the *Learners as data source* perspective is considered a 'model of non-participation' (Hart, 1992) should be rejected. Instead, we have argued that including student voice through this perspective can allow for a large group of students to actively engage in research. Especially when combined with the *Learners in dialogue* (as we did in this case) or the *Learners as initiators* perspectives, a multi-dimensional dialogical process can be established through which traditional conventions of research can be deconstructed. In aiming for this reciprocal relationship Christensen and Prout (2002) argue that 'researchers need to explore and justify details of children's participation in research and the decision to involve them in or exclude them from the research process' (p. 483). Because educational research has not yet fully embraced the three perspectives of including student voice, future research in these fields should take Christensen and Prout's (2002) argument

to the next level: educational research should at all times justify why students are involved or excluded and should provide sufficient details in what way(s) their voices played a part in the research process. If we put a halt to the incongruous situation where the *Learners as data source* perspective is frowned upon but is at the same time the dominant way of including student voice, and start observing our students' voices as *sui generis* with 'presence, power, and agency' (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363), their voices will soon become indispensable from future knowledge construction.

## Note

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