This paper reports on an AHRC-funded study of reading groups: people who meet regularly in a range of contexts (from members' houses to institutional contexts such as schools, workplaces and prisons) to discuss and evaluate literary texts. While this is a significant contemporary practice, reading groups are as yet comparatively under-researched and existing work has been mainly ethnographic (Long, 2003) or survey-based (Hartley, 2002). The present study, by contrast, brings a linguistic perspective to the analysis of reading group discourse and associated texts/practices. We apply a combination of qualitative and quantitative linguistic analysis: interactional sociolinguistics, supported by qualitative analysis software, and corpus linguistics. Our interest is in how reading groups work and, specifically in relation to discourse, how textual interpretations/evaluations are constructed in spoken interaction; how such critical activity is interwoven with the social, interpersonal and affective demands of group interaction; and the kinds of reader identities that are discursively constructed.

The project is intended to contribute to the understanding of a relatively widespread literacy practice. It also raises several methodological issues of interest to the applied linguistic study of reading, or literacies more broadly. In the paper, we focus critically on the extent to which literacies may be understood through analysis of the spoken social interactions in which they are embedded and through which they are made manifest; on the analytical status of spoken interactions around reading as both evidence of prior reading practices and as components of reading practices in themselves; and on the analytical potential afforded by a combination of qualitative and quantitative linguistic methodologies.

References
