

## Proposals and Suggestions for the Positive Response of Toddlers to Literature Teaching with Reference to Applied Educational Programs

*Eleni Ilia*  
(University of Athens, Greece)

**Abstract:** Literary readings contribute to mental and social maturity, to the development of creative thinking, to aesthetic cultivation, to contact with timeless, cultural values, to linguistic development, to acquiring more specific knowledge and so on. Consequently, their role in the educational process is valuable and irreplaceable. Reading any literary text is a particularly creative process. We become co-authors of the author, we form expectations for the story, we identify with the heroes, we shape attitudes towards other characters. As a result of this activity, we get the feeling that we are directly involved in narrative events, that we are experiencing personal situations and emotions attributed to the text. That is, what results from our contact with the literary work has the character of experience and contributes to our self-knowledge. The very nature of literature dictates both the aims and the modes of its teaching approach. The choices and manipulations of the teacher himself, his own initiatives, his personal ability and disposition are the decisive factors for the success of literary teaching. Particularly in the Nursery school, the pupils' first contact with the literary phenomenon takes place and their subsequent relation to it is substantially determined and their aesthetic criteria are formed. In order for all students to experience aesthetic enjoyment, the emotional burden that literature offers, we are designing imaginative, attractive educational programs with a playful character, where the “magic” element is at the forefront. We give toddlers the opportunity to express their reading response to literary texts by freely redefining the literary model, exploiting it as a source of inspiration and the driving force of their imagination.

**Key words:** literary teaching, reading response, creative redefinition

### 1. Introduction

Reading a literary text is a particularly “creative process” (Iser, 1990, pp. 44–45). We become co-creators of the author as we respond to the role he has assigned us, according to our “literary ability”. (Culler, 1988, pp. 102, 109, 115) but also the “mood” of the moment (Tziovas, 1987, pp. 236, 239). In reading, we discover the meanings that are false, we create expectations for the evolution of the case, we form attitudes towards different literary characters.

As a result of the intense perceptual activity we perform, we get the feeling that we are directly involved in narrative events. “Identifying” with the heroes (Booth, 1987, pp. 278–281, 378), we convey personal situations and emotions that are attributed to the text. As our contact with literary work has the character of experience, it contributes to our self-knowledge.

---

Eleni Ilia, Ph.D. in Modern Greek Literature, University of Athens; research areas: teaching literature and creative writing.

## 2. Application Details

Over the course of eighteen years we have designed and implemented more than twenty-five different educational literary programs in three public schools in West Attica. From our involvement with these programs, the following suggestions and propositions have emerged, in order for all school toddlers in each school classroom to respond positively to the teaching of literature.

## 3. Common Goals-Pursuits of the Educational Literary Programs

- The toddlers' awareness of the creativity of the reading role.
- The cultivation of reading as a result of the enjoyment offered by literary reading.
- The familiarity with the literary phenomenon.
- Ensuring the universal participation of students and the possibility of expressing and sharing their personal experiences, desires and expectations regarding the texts.
- The cultivation of creative thinking.
- Linguistic development and in particular the cultivation of narrative competence.
- Understanding the connection between the oral and written speech, the property of written speech to represent the oral.

## 4. Methodology of Teaching

### 4.1 Educational Programs with Playful Activities

The very nature of literature dictates both its purpose and its teaching style. Particularly in Nursery school, where the students' first contact with the literary phenomenon takes place and their subsequent relation to it is substantially evaluated and their aesthetic criteria are formulated, we strive to create the conditions and presuppositions that will allow children to experience the aesthetic enjoyment, the emotional burden that literature offers.

As the overriding element of the children's nature is the need and disposition for play (Huizinga, 1989), literary instruction through educational programs is suggested, so that the playful atmosphere attracts all toddlers. The use of educational, animated programs, even when designed with the specific toddler group that will implement them, ensures the creative participation of all students. The power of the "magic element" is extraordinary. Although we all know it is not magic, we accept it as such because of a common agreement, a common disposition to play. Here are some indicative examples of some of the game-related processes that we have implemented with great efficiency:

- Friends with the book heroes: the heroes of the project come to class and tell us about their stories. These are the students themselves, whom we have disguised, using some characteristic object of the narrative persona. In the next phase, the magic wand touches each pupil and then he chooses one of the different characteristic objects that are concentrated in order to "transform" the corresponding hero. This is how the student himself has chosen the hero through his perspective he will refer to literary stories.
- The magic ticket: The student picks up from the teacher an item characteristic of the narrative hypothesis, which is his ticket, to enter the world of history and to choose his role and action in it. In the next phase, the magic ticket is no longer prepared by the teacher and presents it as a surprise, but

immediately after a discussion in the classroom the children propose and construct as a team the magic ticket.

- The glasses of imagination: The children wear the glasses of Mrs. Imagination, which allow them to see “through” the world of history and refer to it.
- The ocean of Imagination: Multicolored fabrics and other heterogeneous items are spread out at some point in the classroom. They are the ocean of imagination, where students consecutively “dive” in order to redefine narrative stories. As time goes by, new objects are added by students to enrich the ocean. These objects may have particular relevance to the narrative hypothesis of the work we present at the time.
- The magic words: Pupils memorize magic words, which may be folk songs or other poems, in relation to the narrative story of a work, or phrases and verses that the pupils themselves write. By expressing or writing them, they have the opportunity to enter the world of history and choose their role and action in it.

#### **4.2 The Role and Attitude of the Teacher in the Programs**

In achieving the aforementioned teaching objectives for literature, the choices and manipulations of the Nursery school teacher himself, the initiatives and the mood he demonstrates play a decisive role. Addressing the teaching of literature as a fantasy game and expression of personality inspires and motivates children to release their imagination on their turn (Eilia H. A., 2004).

Since teachers and students are in the same position regarding literary text — we are all readers — we have exactly the same rights in the reading game. As a consequence, the teacher will avoid acting as an authority, limiting his students’ ability to approach the work of literature. freely and creatively. Certainly, the teacher is one distinguished for his reading maturity. However, the power of students’ imagination can miraculously replenish their lack of reading experience and knowledge of historical and theoretical elements of literature.

An additional requirement is that the teacher be aware that as he/she first reads the text to the pupils, what the pupils are getting is not just the text but also the personal reading of their teacher in it. When the text we present is particularly moving or captivating to us, we support it by reading it. On the contrary, when we read a text that is indifferent to us, our own reading usually undermines it. Consequently, the selection of exclusively evaluative works that affect us emotionally contributes greatly to the effectiveness of our literary teaching.

And as our voice is crucial to our students’ reactions to the text, it would be wise to use it consciously. For example, with the way we paint it as we read through interactive parties or narrative commentaries, we influence student-readers in shaping their attitudes toward various literary heroes or their judgement on the credibility of the narrator.

The illustration of the literary text is also a specific reading, which could guide the imagination of the pupils-readers.

#### **4.3 Stages and Evolution of Educational Programs**

With the influence of the “magic” element and the contribution of the imagination, the students enter the world of literary history and are transformed into literary standard based on their own actual experiences or even their pre-existing reading experiences, in relation to their individual characteristics and personal desires. Through free narration, literary exploitation of literary texts, in other words, as a stimulus and starting point, motivating power of imagination and a source of inspiration for the production of their original narratives, toddlers

substantially express their reading response to literary text. In this process, they are free to identify themselves with specific narrative characters, they relive the narrative scene that fascinates them and shape the course of action according to their personal experiences and desires.

Students produce their own narrative texts with reference to their literary standard, either individually or as a group (Huck, 1979), based on the teaching principle of “autumnal guidance” (Matsagouras, 2001, pp. 180–182, 199–203). They respond to teacher questions that are constantly diminishing, to the extent that their own answers become more complete, moving on the axis of “creative imitation” or that of “reversal” of the literary model (Matsagouras, 2001, pp. 215, 220–222).

Students’ reading response to the above context is always recorded in traditional or contemporary ways (writing on paper, writing on computer, recording, video recording etc.) for diverse use. This utilization (theatrical performance, publication etc.) constitutes a further prerequisite for the pupils to provide an additional “motivation” to freely express their reading impressions when participating in the relevant programs (Eilia & Matsagouras, 2006, pp. 312–313).

## **5. Teaching Material**

Our literary teaching through a variety of educational programs include a multitude of contemporary and classic prose and poetic texts of Greek and Foreign Literature. I cite the world-famous prose portraits “The Beauty and the Beast” by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont and “The Little Prince” by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, which were presented to toddlers in faithful rendering from the original work. Furthermore, from the poems the toddlers were taught in the context of their respective educational programs, let us mention, by way of example, the Greek folk songs from the collection of Nikolaos Politis, The R of Eros, Odysseus Elytis, Hymn to Liberty and the Destruction of Psara, Dionysios Solomos. Here we will present the expression of toddler’s response to works of Modern Greek poets and prose writers. By our choice, we strive to exclusively highlight the power of literary writing and the importance of educational programs.

### **5.1 “Xanthoula”**

In “Xanthoula”, an “anthropocentric” poem by Dionysios Solomos, as is the case with all his work (Kapsomenos, 1988, p. 23), in eight quadruple turns with oligosyllabic, even-limbed verses in iambic meter, a girl’s departure for foreign lands is attributed, with an emphasis on the various emotions caused by separation to her friends. Her name, Xanthoula, which is also the title of the poem, is repeated three times in a row, almost always ending with the word “boat”.

The use of diminutives, the technique of repetition and the pictorial power of Solomos’ pen characterize the poem. His images are dominated by white color — white boat sails, sea foam etc. — and abstraction, for example in the description of Xanthoula, where the only element given to her form is her blond hair. It is masterful that the manner in which the boat is presented carrying Xanthoula, to be gradually removed, until her image is completely blurred as it is rendered through his visual poetry, who watches her excited by the land.

The poet has been emotionally charged by the scene of seclusion, by the emotions of the people involved in this, albeit a random observer. The poet’s emotional burden is shared by the reader, as witnessed by Xanthoula’s widespread dissemination. His excitement manifests itself extensively in the two and a half last turns.

## **5.2 “Trelantonis”**

Although the world changes over time, some elements of it remain unchanged, firmly. Fortunately, one of these is childish nature. Children continue to love the game, behave impulsively motivated by their curiosity to get to know the world and do damage. This is precisely the hero of Penelope Delta’s novel, as the nickname “Trelantonis” testifies.

The sympathy and admiration of the three brothers of Trelantonis, but also the practical recognition of his virtues by the adult members of his family, though often plagued by the traits caused by his lively character, cause the children-readers to identify with him. Little Antonis is a brilliant literary model for those children. Thus, all his positive traits are effortlessly presented.

From Trelantonis, extensive extracts of seven chapters were presented. Here we choose to refer, for example to the chapter “The Boat”, where Antonis and his friend break up a boat and open it at sea. But the weather is fading, the waves take the oars and their lives are in danger. Their family find and save them.

## **5.3 “The Aeolian Earth”**

In the context of our questioning and experimentation on the appropriateness of notable literary works for children, which have not yet been exploited in this direction, we chose Elias Venezis’ “Aeolian Earth” for literary instruction in toddlers. In the book, a boy recounts his life in the Asia Minor countryside until the persecutions of 1914.

Overall, in our lessons we used seven excerpts from five chapters of the book. Here is the excerpt from the chapter titled “Kimidenia”, which refers to the narrations of the toddlers that will follow:

“...just as the snow was leaving the Kimidenia and the land was green, our mother took us, ...and we were going to spend the summer months on the estate near our grandparents. The sea was a long way off, and in the beginning it was a great sadness for me because I was born near it. In the quiet of earth, I remembered the waves, the shells and the jellyfish, the scent of the rotten seaweed and the sails they were travelling on” (p. 30).

# **6. Presentation of Activities**

## **6.1 The Magic Icons**

The children hear the recitation of Solomos’ poem “Xanthoula”, sitting comfortably or lying down, with the recommendation to keep their eyes closed so as not to receive simultaneously other visual stimuli that might distract them. The icons formed in the thought of toddlers listening to the lyrics of the poem, as a result of the pictorial property of the poetic form, which is perfectly suited to childish nature, are magically characterized because they are different.

- According to a schoolgirl story, when Xanthoula’s girlfriends arrive with their children at the dock, they fail to bid her farewell and simply stare at her departing boat. Before leaving for her trip, Xanthoula had been waiting for them in vain for long hours in the rain holding her colorful umbrella.
- A student imagines himself alone at night, sailing in his boat in the open. From there he looks up at the plane lights, by which Xanthoula travels abroad, where she will spend her holidays. The girl preferred to travel at night so that her friends would not notice and get upset.
- Another schoolgirl, identified with Xanthoula, says that she is preparing to travel abroad to visit a friend of her who has settled there. Everyone gives her wishes and tips for traveling, without hiding her

sadness that will set her apart. Xanthoula complains about the sadness of her departure, but her love for sea voyages overwhelms her, never changing her decision to leave.

- While the response of the toddlers to the above cases is dominated by the scene of separation, other narratives have focused on the enjoyment of contact with the sea. Someone presents Xanthoula as a little girl used to going to the beach with her dad for a swim after the Sunday Mass. She often swims as far as the opposite land, so her father worries about her returning.
- Some toddlers have preferred an adventurous evolution, always with a happy ending though. In one story, Xanthoula is presented as a five-year-old girl in a pink dress traveling alone on a boat to her school. The narrator watches her out of her window and when she sees that she is in danger of a sudden thunderstorm, she approaches her with another boat and saves her. On the same evening, Xanthoula organizes a great party to celebrate her rescue.

### **6.2 Trelantonis Fan Club**

Our educational program for Delta's work is entitled "Trelantonis Fan Club". In the context of the program, we have divided the school classroom into fine fixed five-member subgroups, which collectively express their reading response to the various narrative episodes through their free narration. The narrative of the chapter "The Boat" of three of the subgroups follows:

- Uncle has boarded a boat and waits for aunt and children to travel to the island. They go to a farm there to buy eggs because uncle is very fond of scrambled eggs. Antonis goes along to lounge around with the hens. Uncle is fishing with a rod on the trip. Aunt is looking at the sea and the children are playing with the toys they have brought from home. When they get to the island, they play with the sand.
- Trelantonis pushes his boat back and forth with his hand. He has placed it in the bathtub. Pouloudia asks him if she can get her boat to play together. But Pouloudia's boat does not catch Antonis' boat, which is faster. Then, he takes his boat and Alexander goes into the game too. Alexandra is looking for them. She wants to show them a small boat she has found. Their dad had it when he was a kid. They tried it and it was the fastest of all.
- The two kids, Antonis and Alec, are in the boat. The waves drive the boat away from the land. They can't stop it with their paddles and Alec starts crying. The waves are drifting them deeper and deeper. Now, Antonis wants to cry too. But the weather is suddenly changing. The waves are heading to the beach and are slowly taking their boat to land. That's how they are saved. When they return to their homes, no one has understood what happened.

### **6.3 The Aeolian Earth Goes to...Nursery School.**

In the program for Venezis' novel we gave the title "The Aeolian Earth goes to...Nursery School". After reading each passage, all toddlers illustrate it. Each of them then selects one of the paintings of their classmates and develops their own narrative of the extract, with reference to the painting they have chosen. Thus, between the text and the reader the other reader is inserted, the dialogue with the literary text widens.

All students therefore have an essential motivation to carefully read the text and consequently the opportunity to enjoy it, as they will then present their reading response to the classroom. Toddlers also take great care of their paintings, so that they attract the interest of their classmates and use them in their narratives. Individual narratives of two toddlers follow:

- The little kid with his mum have not left for his grandfather's estate because the snow has not melted in

Kimidenia yet. While in town, he picks up shells to make constructions when he is on the estate. So, he will spend his time in the countryside and when he returns to the city, he will sell his constructions to his friend. He will offer his grandfather the money to buy tools for the estate.

- Children love grandpa's house because it has beautiful colors. A pirate often goes and picks the kids up from there. He takes them on his boat and they travel to a Greek island. The pirate is not wild; he does not grab treasures and nobody is afraid of him. He has this boat to take people for a swim. When he goes to their house, they have his own room to put him up because he is a grandfather's friend.

## 7. Evaluation

The involvement of toddlers in different programs is universal and enthusiastic. As a result of the foregoing illustrative quotation of toddlers' reading response to two passages and a poetic text, expressed both through collective as well as individual narratives, creativity and originality characterize children's thinking.

The free and effortless expression of toddlers' reading approach to literary works in the form of their narrative texts which have their work as a stimulus and starting point, is linked to our creative role in the reading process.

All the aims of literary teaching to toddlers in the context of educational programs with playful activities are achieved in each case in full harmony with the characteristics and properties of literature and with the nature of toddlers.

## References

- Benekos A. (1981). *Zacharias Papantoniou. A Station in Children's Literature*, Athens, pp. 109–166.
- Booth W. C. (1987). *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Culler J. (1988). "Literary competence", in: J. P. Tompkins (Ed.), *Reader-response criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, pp. 101–117.
- Ilia E. and Matsagouras I. (2006). "From Game to Speech: Production of children's texts through playful activities", in: P. Papoulia-Tzelepi, A. Fterniati, K. Thivaivos (Eds.), *Literature Research and Practice in Greek Society*, Conference Minutes: Ellinika Grammata, pp. 307–317.
- Ilia E. (2004). "Literature reading-teaching as a fantasy game and expression of personality", *Diadromes*, Vol. 15, pp. 167–178.
- Huck C., Hepler S. and Hickman J. (1979). *Children's literature in the Elementary School*: Holt Rinehart and Winston, pp. 679–713.
- Huizinga J. (1989). *Homo Ludens*, trans. S. Rozakis – G. Lykiardopoulos. Athens: Gnosi.
- Iser W. (1990). *The Implied Reader. Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kallergis H. (1995). *Approaches to Children's Literature*, Athens: Kastaniotis.
- Kapsomenos E. (1998). *Dionysios Solomos. An Anthology of Solomic Poetry* (Introduction – Comments). Athens: Greek Parliament.
- Matsagouras I. G. (2001). *The School Class, v. B': Text-centric Approach to Written Speech*. Athens.
- Pascucci M. and Rossi F. (2002). "Not just a scribe", *Gefyres*, Vol. 6, pp. 16–23.
- Poslaniek K. (1992). *To Give Children the Appetite for Reading*, trans. St. Athini, Athens: Kastaniotis.
- Tziouvas D. (1987). *After the Aesthetic: Theoretical Tests and Interpretive Readings of Modern Greek Literature*, Athens: Gnosi.