

Comprehension of Literary Texts by Elementary School Pupils in Greece

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This paper attempts to record the popularity of recreational reading among pupils, focusing on their understanding of the text. Initially we explore the factors, i.e. family and school, that influence pupils' reading habits. Then, using the questionnaire method, we investigate what a reader-pupil in the last two years of elementary school in Greece understands after having read a literary text, with respect to the fictional characters, setting, plot, viewpoint/narration and style.

Introduction

Recreational reading among children has engaged researchers all over the world. Even today, in an age dominated by images, the issue continues to exist. Understanding of literary texts is likewise of concern to researchers on a global level, since young readers either do not read, or when they do read, it tends to be in a mechanical rather than substantial way. Based on this fact and using Descriptive Statistics and Multivariate Statistical Analysis, we have undertaken to investigate the degree to which Greek pupils understand a literary text. We circulated the questionnaires among teachers from various parts of Greece. This dispersion lends the research greater representationality and validity.

The aims of the survey, some of which are being presented here, are:

- To investigate whether and to what degree pupils in the last two years of elementary school today read literary texts, and the role of the most basic parameters in developing their love of reading.
- To ascertain whether these pupils understand a literary text in terms of the fictional characters, setting, plot, viewpoint/narration and style, and to identify the factors that influence their understanding.
- To draw conclusions that will make possible a fuller study of the research topic.

The findings

We collected 797 questionnaires from communities in various regions of Greece: Dodecanese, Macedonia, Thessaly, Thrace, Attica, Athens and the Peloponnese, whose inhabitants number from $\leq 10,000$ to $>100,000$:

Table 1: *Population in the survey area*

	no.	%
>100,000 inhabitants	73	9.16
50,001–100,000 inhabitants	388	48.68
30,001–50,000 inhabitants	90	11.29
10,001–30,000 inhabitants	206	25.85
$\leq 10,000$ inhabitants	40	5.02
TOTAL	797	100.00

The following data resulted from processing the material:

Table 2: *Pupils' grade*

	no.	%
5th	348	43.66
6th	440	55.21
No reply	9	1.13
TOTAL	797	100.00

Table 2 shows the number of pupils in the survey per grade. The majority of the pupils are in the 6th grade of elementary school. In terms of the gender identity of the survey, 400/50.19% are girls, and 392/49.18% are boys. As regards the occupation of the parents whose children took part in the survey (Table 3), the sample represents a broad social spectrum:

Table 3: *Occupation of pupils' parents*

	Occupation of father		Occupation of mother	
	no.	%	no.	%
Professional self-employed	107	13.43	61	7.65
Educator	38	4.77	76	9.54
Office employee	175	21.96	169	21.20
Farmer, stock-breeder, fisherman	32	4.02	10	1.25
Technician, contractor, artisan	59	7.40	4	0.50
Unskilled worker	39	4.89	17	2.13
Merchant	65	8.16	20	2.51
Sales clerk, private employee	25	3.14	26	3.26
Service provider	131	16.44	75	9.41
Armed services, police	32	4.02	3	0.38
Unemployed	2	0.25	4	0.50
Self-employed (other)	42	5.27	19	2.38
Housewife			243	30.49
No reply	50	6.28	70	8.78
TOTAL	797	100.00	797	100.00

Table 4 indicates parents' reading preferences. Data processing shows that the pupils' fathers read mainly newspapers, followed by books and magazines:

Table 4: Parents' reading preferences

	Father						Mother					
	Books		Magazines		Newspapers		Books		Magazines		Newspapers	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
A lot	125	15.68	48	6.02	340	42.66	291	36.51	198	24.84	65	8.16
Quite a lot	206	25.85	163	20.45	230	28.86	264	33.12	298	37.39	164	20.58
<i>A lot + quite a lot</i>	331	41.53	211	26.47	580	71.52	555	69.63	496	62.23	229	28.74
Rarely	220	27.60	252	31.62	138	17.31	136	17.06	178	22.33	247	30.99
Not at all	175	21.96	247	30.99	58	7.28	56	7.03	73	9.16	238	29.86
<i>Rarely + Not at all</i>	395	49.56	499	62.61	196	24.59	192	24.09	251	31.49	485	60.85
No reply	71	8.91	87	10.92	31	3.89	50	6.28	50	6.28	83	10.41
TOTAL	797	100.00	797	100.00	797	100.00	797	100.00	797	100.00	797	100.00

By contrast, their mothers prefer to read books and magazines; few read newspapers. Compared to mothers, significantly fewer fathers read books. The table below proves the family to be the basic factor in a child's reading, since parents try to motivate their children to read literary books. Fewer parents encourage their children to play with their friends, or to watch television:

Table 5: Family encouragement of extra-curricular activity

	no.	%
To read literature	567	71.14
To watch television	58	7.28
To play with friends	149	18.70
No reply	23	2.88
TOTAL	797	100.00

A total of 485 pupils declare that they read literature without being prompted; 169 admit that they need prompting, and 112 pupils, in addition to their own desire, need to be prompted by others.

Pupils who declare that they have been prompted are encouraged first by their mother (194/24.34%) and second by their father (95/11.92%), followed by siblings (61/7.65%), teachers (54/6.78%), friends (51/6.40%) and relatives (30/3.76%). It is worth noting that teachers urge their pupils to read much less than one might have expected. Catherine Kurkjian and Nancy Livingston (2005:786), considering the question of the right book for the right child for the right situation, pondered how to cater to children's interests and tastes in literature, and what responsibility teachers have for

introducing books with high artistic and literary value. They also discussed the question of teachers' responsibility for encouraging children to become lifelong readers who read a wide range of literature for a variety of purposes.

Table 6 indicates pupils' reading preferences. Most of them like to read comics; many prefer novels, and fewer select fairy tales and short stories. Last place in their list of preferences, despite its value (Robinson and Summerfield, 1967:18), is poetry, contrary to research in the U.S. where it is in first place (Glazer, 1991:73):

Table 6: Preferred reading

Order of preference	Poetry		Short stories		Novels		Comics		Fairy tales	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
1	58	7.28	70	8.78	198	24.84	225	28.23	129	16.19
2	59	7.40	130	16.31	150	18.82	148	18.57	112	14.05
3	89	11.17	119	14.93	130	16.31	67	8.41	114	14.30
4	104	13.05	142	17.82	100	12.55	64	8.03	103	12.92
5	130	16.31	159	19.95	51	6.40	94	11.79	96	12.05
6	228	28.61	41	5.14	54	6.78	101	12.67	110	13.80
No reply	129	16.19	136	17.07	114	14.30	98	12.30	133	16.69
TOTAL	797	100.00	797	100.00	797	100.00	797	100.00	797	100.00

In the 1980s, Nicholas Tucker observed the influence of comics and appreciated their special artistry and dual function of subversion and reassurance. By contrast, he had reservations about fairy tales, feeling that some writers would try and write stories to serve themselves, rather than putting themselves at the service of the story. Writers should not, he concluded, consider themselves wiser than a folktale (Neil, 1981:161–62).

Parents' persistence in inspiring love of books in their children's and pupils' reading habits is also reflected in the next table, in which it is confirmed that about half the pupils have read more than 20 literary books, whereas only 121 have read no more than five:

Table 7: Number of books pupils have read

	no.	%
≤ 5	121	15.18
5-15	128	16.06
16-20	186	23.34
>20	358	44.92
No reply	4	0.50
TOTAL	797	100.00

From replies to other questions, it can be seen that most pupils agree that children's literature helps them to develop their imagination, acquire knowledge, express themselves correctly, communicate more readily with others and see the world more optimistically; at the same time books relax and entertain them.

We then explored the children's understanding of text, starting with the fictional characters, without whom there is no story. Recognition of fictional characters is confirmed by whether the reader-pupils have noticed that the protagonist has changed or has remained the same as the plot unfolds. Those who noted some change in the heroes attribute it to changing conditions or to social and cultural events or to influences on them. Evaluating the findings, we note that authors create their heroes in such a way that they evolve, which the majority of pupils notice. Some state, however, that the heroes do not change, either because they remain faithful to their values and ideals, or because no alteration was noticed.

Assessing these replies and considering the answers to other questions as well, we can see that change in the characters falls into two categories. The first includes the author as an extra-textual factor. His or her role is regarded as very important in relation to the intra-textual factors (e.g. the characters' realisation of their mistakes), whether they are *external* and unrelated to the personality of the characters (money, luck, living conditions, change of circumstances) although influencing them, or *internal*, portraying the characters' inner world (reasoning, emotions etc.). The pupils' replies reinforce the literary theory about the dynamics of characters.

Regarding the pupils' understanding of a literary text through the relationship between the creation of suspense and increased interest, the survey revealed that 330 pupils believe that adventure increases suspense and interest, 109 that tension is created and interest is thus increased when the hero is in a difficult position, 116 that suspense and interest increase when his life is in danger and 45 that interest increases when there is some unexpected change in a pleasant direction. Many pupils attribute this relationship to a combination of all these narrative techniques, and few pupils do not agree that these parameters increase the suspense and interest.

In other questions, pupils accept the relationship between suspense, realism and the plausibility of the story, without justifying their opinion. Others associate this relationship with lively and detailed description, strong emotions and suspense, unexpected twists in the plot, and the belief that what happens in a story could also happen in real life. Surveys in other countries (Protherough, 1983:9) confirm these views. However, some do not accept this correlation, arguing that fiction is unrelated to reality.

The reader's ability to identify the narrator and his/her relationship to the events shows a high degree of perceptive and critical ability. But since many usually confuse the author, narrator and protagonist, we explored how the pupils perceived the narrator's identity. Most can distinguish the narrator from the author or the hero and attribute the story to the narrator, who creates suspense in order to increase its realism and plausibility. Many reply that they can distinguish the narrator, without justifying

their reply, whereas quite a few have a hard time recognising him/her. These difficulties are due either to *internal* factors, i.e. the reader's lack of interest or failure to understand (59/7.40%), or to *external* ones, shifting the responsibility for the reader's failure to understand the text to the author. We believe that any difficulty or inability in identifying the narrator is due to the fact that children's fiction is absent from the elementary school curriculum as an independent subject, and is taught as part of the language class. In this way, teachers are not given an opportunity to help pupils read literary texts more effectively.

Replies to a related question show that the majority of pupils (514/60.50%) prefer first-person narrative, because they identify the author or protagonist with the narrator. They believe that the author lived the events he describes. Thus, the story acquires vitality, realism, suspense and plausibility. However, many pupils (213/26.13%) prefer third-person narrative, because they see it as more objective and convincing. Those who give reasons for their reply argue that the third-person narrative is more plausible because somebody else is telling the story, not the protagonist. They also believe that the use of details in narration or description increases the realism and plausibility of the text because it makes the heroes seem more lifelike. The following table shows the preferences of students in more detail concerning the type of narration and on the persuasiveness of the story:

Table 8: *When do you believe that the story is more persuasive?*

	no.	%
First-person narration	151	18.97
The person who wrote it experienced it	171	21.46
It is more beautiful	16	2.01
It makes it more lively	43	5.40
The first person singular can be one of us	24	3.01
It helps us understand it better	30	3.76
Various reasons	79	9.91
<i>Partial total</i>	514	64, 50
Third-person narration	80	10.04
It sounds better and is more interesting	45	5.65
The narration is more lively	17	2.13
It is more real and persuasive, because someone else narrates it	27	3.39
Various reasons	44	5.52
<i>Partial total</i>	213	26.73
I don't know	3	0.38
No answer	67	8.41
TOTAL	797	100.00

We then investigated the pupils' understanding of style, because this registers comprehension of the story's subtle conceptual shades. Pupils confirm that the author uses more verbs (simple style, understandable) than nouns (composite style, hard to understand). Their replies are fully in harmony with the basic feature of children's literature, i.e. that it is simple and understandable.

Finally we explored whether pupil-readers draw experience from reading literature. The replies do not differ significantly from those given to other questions. Again, priority is attached to experience and knowledge, to cultivating the imagination, to enriching the vocabulary, and to the reader's identification with the protagonist. Those who deny the contribution of literature to the acquisition of experience base their argument on the fact that the stories are not true and that the readers cannot do the same things as the heroes.

Despite the fact that quite a few pupils either did not reply to the question about creating experience, gave an irrelevant answer or declared that they do not know what experience is, the overwhelming majority tried to determine the sources of experience in relation to literary texts. This effort is in line with previous research (Protherough, 1983:12), according to which children learn from the experience they have acquired by reading different types of texts; and readers' development is associated with their ability to read and respond in a variety of ways.

We then tried to distinguish which literary genre pupils preferred, based on gender, and found that boys are more likely than girls to prefer comics, while girls are more likely than boys to favour novels. The results of statistical analysis show that girls like poetry, short stories and fairy tales more than boys. These preferences reveal the significance of literary genres to each sex.

The number of books read by pupils also depends on gender, always in conjunction with the more general stereotyped views about gender that have survived up to the present, such as that boys acquire experience mainly through society and not through books. Thus we also observed that girls read more than boys by analysing the relevant data. Indeed they read without being encouraged and are rarely urged by others to read. On the contrary, boys need more encouragement to read than girls do. These findings are in agreement with comparable work by other researchers who have observed that boys from ten to fourteen years old read less than girls (Cloer and Pearman, 1992; Kush and Watkins, 1996; Wigfield, 1997; Coles and Hall, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2006), who read a lot because they like books and enjoy reading (Gambell and Hunter, 2000; Greenberg et al., 2006).

Whether or not a child reads literature is also influenced by their parents' occupation. Professional self-employed parents hold first place in encouraging their children to read literature. They are followed by private employees/sales clerks, farmers, educators, the unemployed, office employees and the other self-employed. On the contrary, technicians are most likely to urge their children to watch television. They are followed by the unemployed, unskilled workers, service workers, housewives, office employees and farmers. Parents who work in the armed forces or the police are most

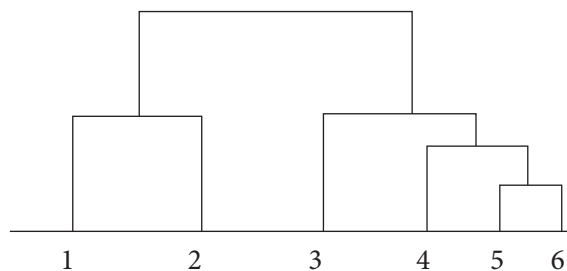
likely to encourage their children to play with their friends. Then come merchants, housewives, educators and service workers. These finds are somewhat differentiated from the conclusions of the US researchers (Chall and Jacobs, 2003) who argued that pupils from nine to nineteen years of age who come from financially comfortable families with social status read more than children of families of a lower social and financial level.

The results of Multivariate Data Analysis

After presenting the frequencies and percentages of the replies as well as the correlations between certain pairs of questions, we analysed all the questions with their replies using two Multivariate Data Analysis methods: Correspondence Analysis and Cluster Analysis.

Correspondence Analysis uses taxonomy criteria to define the factors that differentiate the pupils who took part in the survey, in order of importance. The first taxonomy criterion (1st factor) represents the differentiation between the features of pupils who live in cities with 50,000–100,000 inhabitants and those of pupils who live in larger or smaller cities or in villages. The second taxonomy criterion (2nd factor) expresses the contrast between boys who have read a few books and girls who have read many. And finally the third taxonomy criterion (3rd factor) distinguishes pupils in fifth grade who prefer to read fairy tales from those in sixth grade who like novels.

Cluster Analysis groups pupils in clusters based on the criterion of their common features, and at the same time presents, through the diagram below, the way in which these groups are interconnected:



Cluster Analysis diagram

Cluster 1 consists of 40.28% of the pupils, those with the following common features: they live in cities of 50,000–100,000 inhabitants, are in fifth grade, can easily distinguish the main hero in a literary text, notice if the characters change, and if this happens, believe that they are very different at the end of the story; they soon realise who is narrating the story, read extra-curricular books without being encouraged, have comics and fairy tales as their sixth preference for fiction, with novels first and short

stories third; their father is mainly in trade or professional self-employed or reads a newspaper at home, while their mother is mainly in trade and reads newspapers and magazines; they notice if the person narrating the story uses the first person, they believe that a story is more convincing if it is written in the third person, that, in order to increase the reader's interest, the author places the hero in danger, and that dialogue makes a text more understandable and pleasant.

Cluster 2 consists of 7.78% of the pupils, those with the following common features: They live in cities of 50,000–100,000 inhabitants and are in fifth grade; they believe that after elementary school, people stop reading books and that their parents are among those who object to the reading of literature; they can easily distinguish the main hero in the text they are reading, they believe they notice whether the characters have changed, and if this happens, they believe that they are very different at the end of the story; their first preference is for fairy tales, while novels are third, comics are fifth and short stories fourth; they believe that the author tries to strengthen his readers by conveying the experience derived from the heroes' adventures and that reading extra-curricular books helps them emotionally, while they are simultaneously making good use of their leisure time. Finally they state that when they are with their fellow pupils, they do not discuss books and that they have read fewer than five books.

Cluster 3 consists of 4.77% of the pupils, those who live in settlements smaller than 10,000 inhabitants and whose fathers are mainly farmers; their fathers usually watch television at home, rarely read newspapers and never books; their mothers read no newspapers; these pupils declare that by reading extra-curricular books they learn, enjoy themselves and acquire experience. Their first preference is comics, and fifth is novels. They believe that they can distinguish the protagonist, because they read carefully but also because he/she does special things or talks a lot. They also believe that dialogue makes a text more understandable and pleasant, that a story is more plausible when the protagonist speaks in the first person, because he appears to be "one of us", and that the heroes of a story do not change at the end because people don't change easily.

Cluster 4 consists of 12.05% of the pupils, chiefly in sixth grade, who live in settlements of 30,000–50,000 inhabitants and whose father is mainly an unskilled worker. They declare, in answer to the relevant question, that they do not know what experience is, that a story is more believable when it is written in the first person and that no one objects to their reading extra-curricular books. When they are encouraged to read books, it is at the urging of their siblings and friends, despite the fact that they themselves may find it tiring or boring to read; they do not understand a text easily and do not discuss books when they are with their friends; they believe that authors use more nouns than verbs, that the heroes in a story remain the same and that the main hero can easily be identified because he does special things or talks a lot.

Cluster 5 consists of 26.47% of the pupils, who live in cities of 10,001–30,000 inhabitants, whose mother works mainly in the service sector. They declare that their

parents, siblings and teachers encourage them to read books, despite which they have not read more than 10 books, but believe that people never stop reading. They believe that in a literary story everything can change suddenly, that a story is livelier when the narration is in the first person and that experience is created by people themselves and not by authors.

And finally, Cluster 6 consists of 8.66% of the pupils, chiefly in sixth grade, who live in cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants, whose parents work mainly in the service sector; they read books upon the encouragement of their mother and do not intend to stop reading, because in this way they learn and have fun. They believe that the text becomes more believable when it has a very good description of the heroes, that dialogue makes a text more vivid, that the author tries to strengthen readers since he knows more about life, and that the story is more plausible when it is written in the third person. They do not think that books help communication, but believe that experience is created mainly by acquired knowledge and that authors use more nouns.

Conclusions

Evaluating the findings, we conclude that parents would like to guide their children into reading fiction. We also ascertained that most pupils:

- Read fiction without being encouraged. But when they are encouraged, it is chiefly by their family rather than the school.
- Read mainly comics and novels. Poetry leaves young readers relatively unmoved.
- Believe that literary texts contribute to cultivating the imagination, to linguistic and intellectual development, to social integration and moral training.
- Can easily identify the protagonist and the changes in his character. They note the causes of each change, which they think increases the plausibility of the story.
- Determine the reasons for suspense and believe that it makes the story more realistic and plausible.
- Identify the narrator easily. They prefer first-person narrative, even though many believe that third-person narrative makes the story more believable.
- Delight in the use of dialogue, because they think it makes the story livelier, more enjoyable and more believable.

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