

## Small-Group Discussion and the Development of Interpretive Strategies in Literature Classrooms: a Quasi-Experimental Study with 9<sup>th</sup> - Grade Students

**Agapi Dalkou and Evangelia Frydaki**

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

**Abstract.** This article presents a quasi-experimental study exploring the effect of small-group discussion on students' ability to develop interpretive strategies in literature classrooms. In the absence of such research in secondary education, we conducted a study with 9th-grade students, including one experimental group and one control group. The main hypothesis was that, when students approach literary texts by working in peer-led small groups, with a teacher facilitator, they develop interpretive strategies to a greater extent than when they approach texts within the context of teacher-centered instruction. Results indicated that, by the end of the academic year, a) students who studied literary texts in small groups developed interpretive strategies to a higher level than students who worked on texts alone, within the context of teacher-centered instruction and b) students of the experimental group demonstrated higher individual competence in the development of interpretive strategies, but the improvement was not statistically significant. Conclusions and implications for educational practice are being discussed.

**Keywords:** secondary education; literature classrooms; interpretive strategies; interpretation; small group discussion

### **Introduction**

A common problem often identified in literature classrooms, both in secondary and college education, is students' lack of ability -or preparedness- to assume an interpretive stance on their own (Eckert, 2008). Relevant research suggests that struggling readers' comprehension of literary texts can be improved if their teachers provide them with suitable reading skills, as well as with regular opportunities to read, discuss texts and respond to literature (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012).

However, as Hamel & Smith (1998) point out, there are few models that can help teachers overcome the difficulties they face in helping students

comprehend texts and, at the same time, be involved in student-centered discussions. Likewise, teachers find themselves in an awkward position when they try to teach their students how to deal with a literary text – how to interpret it - by avoiding the danger to impose the one and only “correct” interpretation.

A possible solution to this problem is claimed to be the use of small-group discussion. Small-group work is the essential aspect of cooperative learning, which, according to R. Slavin, “...refers to a variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content” (Slavin, 1995, p. 2). Working in small groups is considered as a fundamental part of academic learning in general (Gillies & Ashman, 2003), as it enhances student involvement in the learning process (Hiltz, 1998). Moreover, when it comes to secondary education, cooperation matches with the adolescent culture, since, as Slavin (1995) points out, during adolescence, “the peer group becomes all-important” (Slavin, 1995, p. 3) and small-group work provides both high and low-achieving students with the opportunity to succeed academically without peer contempt.

Given the limited research in this area, particularly in the case of Greece, this study aims to explore whether middle adolescents approaching literary texts by working in small groups develop interpretive strategies to a greater extent than when they approach texts within the context of teacher-led instruction. We consider that such an exploration could be helpful for both the research community and literature teachers in secondary schools.

### **Review of Related Literature: Small Groups and their Effects on Adolescent Students’ Reading Skills**

**Research on Primary School Students and Early Adolescents.** Over the last two decades, a number of studies on small-groups and their use on literature instruction has demonstrated the positive effects of peer-led, small-group discussions on students’ interaction with literary texts. Many of these studies focus on primary school students (up to 11 years of age), like the work of Almasi, (1995) on peer-groups and their effect on students’ ability to solve socio-cognitive conflicts that occur during literature discussions, the study of Law (2011) on cooperative learning and reading comprehension, or the work of Slavin et al. (2009) on the effects of “The Reading Edge”, a cooperative program for the teaching of literature in middle schools (sixth-grade students).

Supporting evidence of the relationship between cooperative or collaborative learning and enhanced literacy outcomes is also provided by a recent meta-analytic review conducted by Puzio & Colby (2013). The authors reviewed over thirty years of research on literacy. They found that, overall, student performance on literacy tests was significantly higher when teaching practices included cooperative and collaborative learning activities. This review included studies with students from Grades 2 through 12.

Early adolescents are also the center of Fletcher’s (2014) research on “effective” reading strategies for early adolescents (11-13 years old). Fletcher conducted an extensive literature search of related studies that have taken place since the mid-1990s. The review ends up with a summary of effective teaching features and practices, including small group work; however, working in small groups is just one of the many practices that “effective” teachers implement, and it is not presented as the key to a successful teaching.

Stevens (2003) has conducted a study which focused on adolescents and their specific learning needs. Stevens implemented a literacy program called "Student Team Reading and Writing" (STRW). The program focuses on early adolescents (6th-8th grade, age 11-14), its primary goal being to respond to their needs and abilities, by incorporating a number of instructional changes, like using "good" literature as the basis for reading instruction, providing instruction on reading comprehension strategies, using cooperative learning strategies, etc. Results favored students of the experimental schools against students of the comparison schools, whose teachers used "*traditional instructional methods*" (p.153). The author believes that cooperative learning is probably the most effective component of the program, since it motivates students to actively engage in the learning process and it takes advantage of adolescents' "*strong peer orientation*" (p. 156). Like most studies in literacy instruction, this study also focuses on reading comprehension as a desired learning outcome or ability.

In their experimental study, Vaughn et al. (2011) examined the effects of a reading program called "Collaborative Strategic Reading" (CSR) on reading comprehension. It was a large-scale experiment, with 7th and 8th grade students. Results showed that treatment students scored higher than control students on the reading comprehension tests. The authors state that it is possible that collaborative work, which promotes student engagement and discussion about text, may be the key element of CSR. However, their study does not address which elements of CSR have a major impact on reading comprehension.

**Research on Middle Adolescents.** When it comes to middle adolescent students, research seems to be more limited. Studies in this field have also illustrated the positive outcomes of small-group discussions of literature. In an earlier study on 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, Nystrand, Gamoran & Heck (1993) investigated whether and under what conditions peer-group work would help students think and reason about literary texts. They found that small-group discussion can be very effective if teachers want students to develop higher order thinking, compare ideas, or reach a general agreement on a controversial issue. However, the positive effects of small-group work are visible only if certain conditions are met; groups must be highly autonomous and group tasks must be carefully designed, so that they are inherently collaborative and interesting to students.

With 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students as participants, the study of Fall, Webb & Chudowsky, (2000) demonstrated the positive effects of small-group discussion on students' comprehension of literature. The authors compared academic performance on language arts tests between students who discussed the story they had read in small groups and students who did not discuss it. The key finding of the study was that peer-group cooperation in a 10-minute discussion within groups of 3 had an essentially positive impact on students' comprehension of the story. The mechanisms that students used to solve socio-cognitive conflicts during group discussions included the construction of fuller and more accurate meanings of the stories, as a result of students' exposure to alternative ideas.

**Research on Small Groups and Students' Reading Skills: the Case of Greece.** In the case of Greece, the search results of the relevant literature were highly disappointing. Research in Greece on cooperative/collaborative learning

alone, is limited. Review of the most prominent Greek scientific journals (educational and literacy) <sup>1</sup> from 1995 until today, did not reveal any scientific studies on small-group work. Research on the Internet was more fruitful, since it uncovered that there is a research team at the University of Patras (the HCI-UPatras group), that has remarkable research activity in the area of *Computer Supported Collaborative Learning* (CSCL)<sup>2</sup>. Their studies describe computer-supported collaborative learning modelling environments and evaluate collaborative learning within these environments. As interesting these studies may be, unfortunately, none of them refers to literature instruction. Similarly, research in the Greek National Archive of PhD theses has shown a few studies in cooperative/collaborative learning, but none of them explored its effects on literature instruction. Most of these studies also focused on CSCL, which was usually implemented in math and science classrooms.

**Conclusions from the Literature Review.** In reviewing the research on small-group work and its effects on adolescent students' reading skills, we realized two things. First, the vast majority of the studies focuses on the effects of small-group discussion on *comprehension*<sup>3</sup>, which is usually measured with standardized multiple-choice tests. *Interpretation* of literary texts, on the other hand, is usually considered in these studies as an intellectual ability or action incorporated into the wider concept of literature response. Few studies focus on interpretation itself, like the work of Scott & Huntington (2007), which compared how novice learners interpreted literary texts while working in small, peer groups, versus when they engaged in whole class discussion. Even fewer studies focus on the development of interpretive strategies, like the work of Mayo (2001), which explores the effects of collaborative learning on students' ability to change the interpretive strategies they use. The results of this research indicated that collaborative contexts can effectively broaden the range of students' interpretive strategies. However, participants in both studies were university students. There is a lack of evidence that small-group discussion works equally well with younger students, when it comes to literature interpretation.

This concern brings us to the second issue that emerged from the literature review, which is the question of the age of participants. Recent research with middle adolescents is considerably more limited. Therefore, this study aims to enrich the research on middle adolescent students, and, at the same time, introduce the issue of the development of interpretive strategies as a research objective in secondary education. In particular, it explores whether middle adolescents approaching literary texts through small-group discussion develop interpretive strategies to a greater extent than when they approach texts within the context of teacher-led instruction over a period of one academic year.

Needless to say, this is a pioneer study for Greece, since research on small-groups and its effects on students' reading skills practically does not exist in Greek education.

## Theoretical Background

**The Notion of Interpretive Strategies.** Secondary school teachers often expect students to use sophisticated reading and interpretive approaches requiring them to display an interpretive stance, without systematically supporting them to develop interpretive strategies (Orlando, Caverly, Swetnam

& Flippo, 2003). However, a clear definition of the notion of *interpretive strategies* has not been given yet in literary theory, neither has it been clearly defined which these strategies exactly are.

When the term *interpretive strategies* is used by literary theorists, it usually refers to the methods of interpretation of literary texts. The notion of interpretive strategies is frequently used by Stanley Fish (1980) to denote the strategies employed by interpretive communities<sup>4</sup>. According to Fish, interpretive strategies are methods "...not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (p. 171). When Fish talks of methods for "writing" texts, he does not use the term literally; he refers to the notion of creative reading, through which the reader "creates" the text by assigning intentions to it. Another definition of interpretive strategies is given by Jonathan Culler (1975), who identifies as interpretive strategies the "*conventions for reading literary texts*" (p.118), and "*interpretive operations*" (p. 162).

Kintgen (1990) has described the dual role of interpretive strategies, arguing that these strategies impose both the *goal* of interpretation – that is, the kind of meaning we are looking for – and the *methods* we use to interpret literary texts (Kintgen, p. 3). Thus, the search for the author's intentions or the search for historical, ideological and socio-cultural influences, constitute interpretive strategies concerning the *kind* of a valid interpretation. Likewise, the use of narratology features, like Genette's (1980) concepts of the narrator's voice and mood, or looking for metaphors and symbols, constitute interpretive strategies concerning the *methods* for reaching valid interpretations; by *valid* meaning interpretations based on textual and not arbitrary data. A different type of categorizing interpretive strategies is used by Lee & Hughes (2012), who adopt in their research ten predetermined interpretive strategies, which fall under four broader categories: Preview, Author's craft, Interpretation and Personal Response. For example, identifying the rhyme is indicated as an interpretive strategy under the Author's Craft category, while making predictions is an interpretive strategy under the Preview category (Lee & Hughes, pp. 496-499). However, this particular categorization of interpretive strategies is incorporated in the broader sense of comprehension, whereas the study presented here focuses on interpretation.

Therefore, based upon the literature on interpretive strategies, in the present study the term *interpretive strategies* is used to describe the set of expectations and methods based on which readers interpret literary texts. These strategies determine both the *kind* of valid interpretations and the *processes* that lead us to these interpretations. For example, when we seek the author's intention in a poem, or when we look for socio-political messages within a literary text, we are using interpretive strategies that determine the *kind* of valid interpretations; that is, the kind of meaning a reader expects to find. Likewise, when we choose to observe the structure of a story, by looking for narratology features, or when we decide to look for metaphors and symbols, we are implementing interpretive strategies that determine *processes* which can help us interpret the text. There are numerous interpretive strategies; as Fish (1980) points out, "*the list is not meant to be exhaustive*" (p.168). In any case, readers – in our case, students – who use interpretive strategies, are those who make

autonomous interpretive efforts; they try to identify the literary discourse by taking into account textual and/or non-textual data; and they attempt to locate the main theme and the essential points of a literary text, in order to find its meaning.

It was considered of essential importance to focus on the notion of interpretive strategies, for two main reasons. First, through the implementation of interpretive strategies, we can see the students' various intellectual abilities unfold. The development and implementation of interpretive strategies is a complex, high-level intellectual process, which presupposes and develops, at the same time, multiple cognitive and aesthetic functions, and engages students into problem-solving processes. Second, as Hamel and Smith (1998) discovered in their research, putting interpretive strategies into the center of the teaching process "...freed the teacher from endorsing a particular interpretation..." (p. 355). The acceptance and encouragement of multiple, yet valid interpretations, sets the base for a literature instruction that enhances critical and creative thinking.

**Small-Group Discussion, Teacher-centered Instruction and Literature Interpretation.** In the present study we use the term *small-group discussion* to describe a teaching practice that is the center of cooperative and collaborative learning and is considered as a key feature of what Alvermann (2002) describes as "*participatory approaches to literacy instruction*" (p. 201). According to Alvermann, participatory approaches are student-centered approaches, which incorporate classroom structures and activities that enhance peer interaction, like literature discussions in small groups. In participatory approaches teachers act as scaffolders, gradually withdrawing their support as students seem more capable of constructing their own learning. When constructing small groups, the level of autonomy given to students can vary. For the needs of the present study, it was decided that discussions of literature in small groups should incorporate the main features of *collaborative reasoning*, as it is described by Chinn, Anderson & Waggoner (2001). According to the authors, in collaborative reasoning discussions, the teacher asks a single central question about the story read. Students adopt positions on the story and then they provide explanations and arguments to support or contradict these positions. Students collaboratively construct their arguments and teachers are encouraged to reduce the amount of time they talk; however, they are invited to scaffold their students on the development of reasoning. In the present study we refer to small-group discussions of literature as a participatory approach to literature instruction, in which students discuss literary texts in groups of 4 or 5, as it is indicated in most cooperative learning methods (Slavin, 1995), following the main principles of collaborative reasoning.

In this study, small-group discussion is compared to the "*teacher-centered transmission model of instruction*" (Alvermann, 2002, p. 201), or, the "*traditional teacher-led whole-class approach*" (Law, 2011, p. 402) as it has also been called. According to Alvermann (2002), the *teacher-centered transmission model of instruction* has a "*lock-step approach to literacy learning*" (p. 201), focusing on subject matter coverage over in-depth, active learning. Teacher-led discussions of literature incorporate the main features of *recitations* (Chinn, Anderson & Waggoner, 2001; Nystrand, 2006). According to Chinn, Anderson & Waggoner, the recitation format has an IRE form: teacher Initiation - student Response -

teacher Evaluation. Moreover, in recitations, the interpretive stance adopted by teachers and students is mainly efferent; that is, readers mainly look for information. The interpretive authority is generally controlled by the teacher, who also controls the turn-taking during the discussion. The teacher also possesses control over the topic, mainly by asking questions, to test students about a matter already known by him/her. Despite the literature supporting cooperative and collaborative learning in literature instruction, the teacher-centered model seems to be the most common, at least in the United States (Alvermann, 2002), whereas, the use of small groups seems to be more limited than we would expect, as Vaughn et al. (2011) state: *"We also realized that few teachers used small groups prior to participating in our study, and when they did, these small groups were not executed with procedures following cooperative grouping, including giving specified roles to students and requiring interactive work around text and responses"* (p. 959). This is also the case for Greece, although this is an empirical rather than a scientific realization, due to the lack of relevant research in Greece. However, if we suppose that educational practices in the classroom follow the national educational policy in each country, we have strong reasons to believe that the use of small groups in Greek classrooms is a rare phenomenon, since, until the year 2013, when the Ministry of Education introduced the project method as obligatory for the teaching of literature on the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, all teaching instructions<sup>5</sup> for literature recommended that teachers should apply the teacher-centered instruction model. Small-group work was simply absent in the official guidelines towards teachers.

Choosing small-group discussions for the teaching of literature and literature interpretation in particular, was based not only on the supporting research data already mentioned. Small-group discussion can foster the development of interpretive strategies, due to the social dimension of literature, which is supported by many theorists: Fish (1980) denotes that the interpretation of literature takes place within a community of readers; that is, an interpretive community. Smagorinsky (2001) believes that readers construct the meanings of literary texts as a result of cultural mediation, since meaning is located not only in the reader or the text, but also in the cultural history that precedes them. Nussbaum (2010) points out that through literature people develop the ability to "get into other peoples shoes", to understand their feelings and desires. Therefore, interpreting literature is, in many aspects, a social action and small-group discussions seem to be a powerful tool in the hands of a teacher who desires to help his/her students develop interpretive strategies.

### **Aim and Research Questions**

The purpose of our study was to explore whether small-group, peer-led discussion fosters the development of interpretive strategies in the teaching of literature in a more effective way compared to teacher-centered instruction. Two research hypotheses guided our study:

1. During the teaching of literary texts, students who work in small groups come up with interpretations of greater diversity and validity compared to students who work within the context of teacher-centered instruction.
2. Students who work in small groups demonstrate higher individual competence in the development of interpretive strategies than students who work within the context of teacher-centered instruction.

The hypotheses indicate that we make a distinction between group productivity and individual competence (Webb, 1995).

## **Method**

### **Design**

In order to test the hypotheses, we conducted a quasi-experimental study, with one experimental group and one control group, which took place during the academic year 2010 - 2011. We introduced as intervention for the experimental group the teaching of literary texts through small-group discussion: students were taught 7 literary texts from the curriculum in groups of 4 or 5. These teaching sessions were equally distributed throughout the whole academic year, interjected by teaching sessions with no intervention. At the same time, the control group received no intervention regarding the teaching strategy. Both groups took a pre-test and a post-test, which measured the students' ability to develop interpretive strategies, before and after the intervention, respectively. During the experiment, all 7 teaching sessions were followed by measurements of the dependent variable - the development of interpretive strategies.

### **Participants**

Two classes of 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students from the same school -a public junior high school in a district of Athens, Greece- participated in the study. The class that constituted the experimental group had 24 students (10 boys and 14 girls) and the class that became the control group had 22 students (13 boys and 9 girls). In choosing our participants, our first concern was to ensure that our students would be able to develop, at some level, interpretive strategies. The ability to interpret is not something exclusively taught in schools; it is "constitutive of being human" (Fish, 1980, p. 172). We can expect that students of all ages can develop interpretive strategies according to the level of their maturation. We chose a school from an urban, middle-class area, so that the students included in the study would be of a socio-economic status representative of the mean of the wider student population (more than half of the Greek population resides in Athens). 9<sup>th</sup> grade was considered a reasonable choice, since students in this grade are old enough to develop interpretive strategies to a satisfactory level, and yet they do not have to meet the demands, pressure and workload that come along with senior high school. The two particular classes (out of four 9<sup>th</sup>- grade classes in the same school), were chosen based on their academic performance. That is, we included the two classes whose students had similar grades in the course of Modern Greek Literature. We used the grades of the previous academic year as a criterion.

### **Materials**

Students of both groups were taught 7 Modern Greek literary texts (both poems and prose) from the national curriculum, that is, texts contained in the school book. The texts were: a) *The bridge of Arta*, a folk song, b) R. Ferraios, *Thourios*, a poem written in 1797, inviting the Greeks to revolt against the Ottoman dominion, c) I. Makrygiannis, *Memoirs*, an excerpt from the memoirs of a Greek general who fought in the revolution against the Ottoman empire, d) E. Roidis, *The Glass Stores*, a humorous short story satirizing the intolerable situation in the Athenian streets and sidewalks, e) K. Palamas, *Ode to the*



*Parthenon*, a poem about the Greek monument, f) K.P. Cavafy, *In 200 B.C.*, a poem talking (among others) about the emergence of the Hellenistic world and g) N. Kazantzakis, *Life and Adventures of Alexis Zorbas*, an excerpt of Kazantzakis' biographical novel.

In every teaching session all students were given *discussion sheets*, which were specially designed for the instruction of the texts. The concept underlying the design of the sheets was the creation of a tool that would be used as a guide for students in their attempt to interpret the text, but also as a data source concerning the learning outcome; that is, students' interpretations and the interpretive strategies behind these interpretations. Constructing an instrument was necessary, since no validated test existed to measure the dependent variable (development of interpretive strategies) for the specific literary texts taught. However, we used as our guide the instrument designed by Fall, Webb & Chudowsky (2000, p. 900), which measured 10<sup>th</sup>-grade students' performance in a variety of skills: comprehension, interpretation and evaluation of literary texts. This instrument was modified to meet the present study's demands, by focusing on interpretation and serving as a teaching and measurement tool at the same time. Specifically, 7 discussion sheets were designed, one for each text, based on the concept of the hermeneutic circle (Dilthey, 1976). According to this concept, the act of reading is a continuous movement between the whole and the parts of the text. In designing our tools we incorporated the principles of the recent hermeneutics, as well as certain principles of the reader-response theory, which focuses on the reader and accepts multiple interpretations. This is why the questions provide the students with some hints or reading guidelines to help them interpret the text, but they do not impose or strictly direct students towards a single interpretation. Each discussion sheet included three questions, which should be answered in written form. The first one asked students to narrate the text or give a summary of its content, by assuming a role of a character in the story. This question focused on a first, holistic approach of the text. The second question focused on the analysis of specific parts of the text (e.g. thematic units, character and literary style evaluation, etc.). The reading instructions became more specific here. The third question asked students to narrate or give a summary of the whole text again, this time from a different perspective, so that the preceding analysis could be utilized (see Appendix A).

The discussion sheets given to the experimental group and the control group were the same, the main difference being that the students in the experimental group were told to answer the first question individually and the next two questions as a team, whereas the students in the control group were told to answer all three questions individually. The students' written answers would be evaluated in terms of interpretive diversity and validity, and the comparison of the grades emerging for the two groups would allow us to test the research hypotheses.

Another data source was the *pretest* and *posttest*, used to test the second research hypothesis, which refers to the students' individual competence in the development of interpretive strategies. Since no such standardized test was found in the bibliography, we proceeded again with a self-developed tool. Taking into consideration the relevant research (e.g. Mayo, 2001, Fall, Webb & Chudowsky, 2000; Kucan & Beck, 2003; Boscolo & Carotti, 2003), we ended up

with a test which had the following form: students were given a literary text they had not been taught. The text – a poem – was chosen considering the students' academic level and background. For example, the poem used in the pretest, *The Companions in Hades* by Giorgos Seferis, has a content familiar to 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students, since they had been taught the epic poem of *Odyssey* in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. At the same time, this poem has an allegoric and symbolic character, which leaves it open to multiple interpretations. The poem for the posttest was chosen in similar grounds. The text was followed by two open questions, designed in a way that encouraged multiple interpretations. Questions also asked students to justify their answers, so that we could identify the interpretive strategies behind these interpretations (see Appendix B).

Both instruments described above were tested for their reliability. In particular, for the pretest and posttest, the instruments were tested through the *split-half* technique (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). The Guttman Split-Half Coefficient was 0.88 and 0.86 for the pretest and the posttest respectively, which was considered to be satisfactory as a reliability indicator for the instrument. Regarding the worksheets, a different technique was implemented, since the instrument could not be divided in half (it contained three questions – activities). Instead, we followed the *parallel* or *alternate forms* procedure (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). As it was mentioned, all worksheets were constructed under the same concept: the hermeneutic circle. It was not possible to test two worksheets at the same time, because this would mean that students would be taught two different texts simultaneously. However, we tested the correlation between the grades in the first and the second worksheet, which were given to the students within a time period of two weeks. Correlation was quite high ( $r = 0.90$ ), giving, thus, a positive indication about the reliability of the instrument. Finally, all measurement tools were evaluated by two graders: the researcher and the school teacher. Correlation between the two graders varied from  $r = 0.84$  to  $0.87$ , which was considered as quite satisfactory, taking into account the subjective nature of evaluating interpretation of literary texts.

During teaching sessions, *observation forms* were used for the experimental group, in order to follow students' participation during the lesson, especially during the group work phase. This tool was similar to Lloyd & Beard's (1995) observation tool for whole class discussions, with some adjustments to fit group work observation. The original Lloyd & Beard's tool was used with the control group. Field notes were also kept during teaching sessions for both groups, as a means of evaluating the teaching and learning process and making possible changes, when needed. Field notes also fostered a deeper knowledge of the learning situation, allowing for richer descriptions and more accurate conclusions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008).

### **Procedures**

The main study covered almost a whole school year (October 2010 - May 2011). There was a preliminary phase (April-September 2010), which included the sampling process, the meetings with the school teacher of the two classes chosen, the decisions about the composition of teams in the experimental group, a preparatory meeting with the students, the pretest, and, finally, a short pilot-research.

It was decided that both groups should have the same teacher in the Modern Greek Language class, in order to ensure equality within groups in terms of a significant variable: the teacher. The problem was that, in Greece, collaborative learning is not widely used yet, and very few teachers have expertise on it. This was also the case of the school teacher in our experiment. It was mutually decided that it would be best for the validity of the experiment if the teacher for both experimental and control group during the intervention was one of the researchers. The researcher, a teacher as well, had been systematically implementing collaborative learning strategies in the teaching of literature for the past 3 years. Being a researcher and a teacher at the same time raises of course the question of bias: the researcher might be tempted to favor the experimental group as a teacher. This is a common challenge when a researcher is also the designer of an intervention (Barab & Squire, 2004). We tried to avoid this by using an observer, who would be present in all teaching sessions and would point out if the researcher was acting in favor of the experimental group. For the same reason, all teaching sessions were tape-recorded. Finally, the school teacher that taught the rest of the texts – without intervention – during the academic year, was the same for both groups, as well.

Regarding the composition of the teams for the experimental group, 5 teams were formed: four with 5 members and one with 4 members.

One hour was spent to inform both experimental and control group students of the procedures concerning their work with the teacher-researcher and the worksheets they would be using. Students were roughly informed about the experiment; that is, they were told that their class was chosen to participate in a study which explored the outcomes of a new method of teaching literature. In the last 20 minutes the pretest took place. Another two hours were spent for a short pilot research, in order to test our tools: work sheets, tests and observation forms.

The main research (October 2010 – April 2011) was the intervention itself, which was implemented in 46 teaching hours. This means that the experimental group was taught Modern Greek literature in small groups with the researcher as the teacher for 23 hours over the academic year, whereas, for the rest of the year, the same group was taught the same lesson with their school teacher, through direct instruction. Likewise, the control group was taught Modern Greek literature through direct, teacher-led instruction with the researcher as the teacher for 23 hours over the academic year, whereas, for the rest of the year, they were taught the same lesson with their school teacher, through direct instruction again.

**Interpreting Literature in Small Groups: a Teaching Model.** Teaching sessions were articulated as follows (each session lasting three 45-minute hours):

*Phase 1: Preparing the Whole Class.* This phase began with the teacher reading the text aloud, so that reading ability differences among students could be controlled. In the end of the reading, the teacher answered possible student questions, concerning vocabulary or comprehension. Next, students were asked to answer the first question in the worksheets individually, within a time limit of 10 minutes. After the time had expired, certain answers (as many as possible, depending on time constraints) were read aloud in class and a whole class

discussion followed, with the students making comments on the answers preceded and the teacher making necessary clarifications.

*Phase 2: Working in Groups.* This was the core part of each teaching session. Students were told to answer the second question on the work sheet, this time as a group, based on certain instructions that had been given to them in the preparatory meeting in the beginning of the school year, based on Johnson & Johnson, 2009a, p. 42 (see Appendix C).

Students were also reminded to follow the instructions on their work sheets (see Appendix A). Apart from the *reader* and *secretary* role, teams were not asked to appoint any other role to their members. It was clearly stated, though, that, as a group, each team would hand only *one* discussion sheet. The time limit for the second question to be answered was 15 minutes this time. As the students were proceeding with their discussion of the text and the formation of their answer, the teacher was walking around the classroom, observing the teams, encouraging students to cooperate and offering support and facilitation, when necessary.

*Phase 3: Whole Class Discussion of Team Work.* After all teams had composed their answers, the “reader” of each team read aloud his team’s answer to the 2<sup>nd</sup> question. Teams’ answers were discussed with the whole class. Students were encouraged to comment on other teams’ answers and the teacher asked questions that further promoted the conversation on the text and helped clarify vague or ambiguous points.

Phases 2 and 3 were repeated for the third and last question of the worksheet.

*Phase 4: Team Work Evaluation.* After the text instruction was over, teams were evaluated on the grounds of both academic performance and collaboration skills. The evaluation was mainly performed by the teacher, based on the grades of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> question on the discussion sheets, as well as on the observation sheets where she recorded each student’s participation during group work. Each team received a final grade (out of 20), which was the sum of the two grades: performance and collaboration.

*Ensuring Team Work.* In order to foster true collaboration among team members and avoid undesirable phenomena such as the “free rider” effect (Slavin, 1995; Webb, 1995), we tried to ensure that certain conditions would be met. First, we focused on *Positive Interdependence and Individual Accountability* (Johnson & Johnson, 2009a & 2009b). We invested a great deal of effort to make our students realize that, within the group, the only way for someone to succeed is the team itself to succeed and that one person’s indifference had a significant negative impact. Second, we tried to promote face-to-face interaction, interpersonal skills, and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 2009a & 2009b). We tried to promote real interaction by forming relatively small groups, with direct eye contact among members, and with the same composition throughout the year, so that strong collaborative bonds would be created. Moreover, we insisted on developing interpersonal skills by regularly giving feedback about acceptable behavior. Next, we chose to construct groups that would be *partially structured*, since, according to the research, these groups tend to be more effective (Sawyer, 2004). Regarding the composition of the student groups, we chose to form teams that would be heterogeneous in terms of academic

performance (Cohen, 1994; Tunkle, Anderson & Evans, 1999) and sex. Finally, the teacher acted as a facilitator, by *modeling*, *coaching* and *scaffolding* (Jonassen, 1999). During group work, she intervened when it was absolutely necessary (for example to answer a question that other group members could not answer or to point out “social loafing” phenomena).

**The Control Group Teaching Model.** At the same time, during the intervention, the students of the control group were being taught the same texts by the same teacher / researcher, through teacher-centered instruction, with the number of sessions being kept constant in comparing the experimental and the control group. In general, we followed the direct instruction model by Joyce & Weil (1986), which includes five main phases: a) Orientation, b) Presentation, c) Structured Practice, d) Guided Practice, e) Independent Practice. In the first two phases the teacher presented the text and provided general guidelines for its interpretive approach. In phase c and d, students worked under the teacher’s guidance, involved in whole class discussion, whereas in phase e they worked alone completing their discussion sheets, with the teacher helping each one individually, in case a student asked for help. Therefore, compared to the experimental group teaching model, the control group model did not involve any small group work; instead, it involved teacher-led whole class discussion and individual practice.

The evaluation phase (April – May 2011) included discussion with the students of both groups concerning the intervention: how they experienced the whole process, whether they found it effective and/or pleasant. The study ended with the posttest.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to test the first research hypothesis, we compared the grades of students of the control and the experimental group for their answers to the 2nd and 3rd question in the discussion sheets. In this way, we could compare interpretations that resulted from teamwork with interpretations that resulted from individual work, for the experimental and the control group, respectively. Answers were given a grade from 1 to 5, with 1 corresponding to comments or interpretations with little or no relation to the text, and 5 corresponding to valid interpretations. When we refer to “valid” interpretations, we mean interpretations sufficiently justified with textual data, meaning that alternative interpretations are possible. Middle grades (2,3,4) corresponded to valid interpretations with no or little justification. Grade 0 was appointed only when there was no answer at all. This grading system, inspired by Boscolo and Carotti (2003), was considered appropriate, because it was open to the evaluation of multiple interpretations. Therefore, in order to compare the answers of the two groups, we added the grades appointed to each one of the two questions in the discussion sheet, that is,  $5 + 5 = 10$ . Next, we estimated the means for each worksheet, for the experimental and the control group separately. The means of the two groups were compared using ANOVA.

In order to test the second research hypothesis, we compared individual interpretations of students of the experimental and the control group. In particular, we used two data sources: grades in the pretest and posttest, and grades of the answers in the first question in each one of the 7 discussion sheets, which was also answered individually by students of both groups. The means of

the grades in the posttest and in the first question of the worksheets were compared using ANOVA. We also ran an ANCOVA to compare the means of the grades in the posttest, controlling for performance in the pretest. Statistical analysis was performed with the statistical package IBM SPSS, ed. 19.

## Results

### Correlation between Teaching Strategy and the Development of Interpretive Strategies in Literature Instruction

Comparison of the mean grades of students in the last 2 questions of all 7 worksheets tested whether discussion in small groups resulted into more diverse and valid interpretations than whole class discussion within the context of teacher-centered instruction. Means and standard deviations of students' grades in literary text interpretation for all 7 teaching sessions, comparing group performance of the experimental group with the respective individual performance of the control group, are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for the Development of Interpretive Strategies by Students of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in all 7 Teaching Sessions (Comparing Group Work with Individual Work).**

Interpretation	Group			
	Experimental (N=24)		Control (N=22)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
1 <sup>st</sup> teaching session	7.73	1.01	4.57	1.56
2 <sup>nd</sup> teaching session	7.67	1.49	5.05	1.95
3 <sup>rd</sup> teaching session	7.70	0.45	4.35	2.19
4 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	8.88	0.28	5.80	1.95
5 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	7.46	1.42	5.83	1.47
6 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	8.71	0.53	6.20	1.94
7 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	8.34	0.31	6.41	1.66
Total	8.07	0.58	5.52	1.56

*Note.* Grades are from 1 to 10.

Data from Table 1 indicate that the experimental group scored higher than the control group, in all 7 teaching sessions (total mean grade 8.07 versus 5.52). ANOVA showed that these differences were statistically significant: for the differences in the total mean grades between the two groups,  $F$  was 55.892, statistically significant at 0.000.  $F$  for the differences in each teaching session

separately, varied from 14.602 to 66.575, in every case statistically significant at 0.000. Finally,  $\eta^2$  for the difference between the total mean grades was 0.560, meaning that the teaching strategy accounted for 56% of the variance of student grades.

These differences, which are indicated as numbers, are practically differences concerning the validity and variability of interpretive strategies developed by students of both groups, which were expressed in their answers in the second and third question of the worksheets. In order to make this picture clearer, we are presenting an example of students' answers, choosing answers representative of the average level of interpretive validity and variability for both groups. The example is taken from the last teaching session. The text taught was an excerpt from N. Kazantzakis, *Life and Adventures of Alexis Zorbas*. This passage describes the scene where the narrator first meets Zorbas. The two heroes' characters emerge from the vivid description and the dialogue that takes place: Zorbas is presented as a passionate, spontaneous person, who enjoys life, mainly with his senses. On the other hand, the narrator (one of the two heroes in the book) is presented as a well-educated, reasonable and sensible person. The last part of the excerpt engages with the description of Zorbas' relationship with his *santouri*<sup>6</sup>. We are citing answers to the last question of the worksheet, which is the following:

*Suppose, now, that you are a group of sailors drinking their coffee in the same coffee shop as the writer, sitting on the next table. You are present at the scene of Zorbas' arrival and you are eavesdropping on the whole conversation that follows. After a while, another friend of yours arrives and sits with you. Describe to him, as a group now, the whole scene of the two men's acquaintance and conversation, commenting on their characters and stressing out some of their ideas that might have impressed you. Finally, tell him if, in your opinion, the writer decided to take Zorbas with him and why.*

The students of the team of *Athena*<sup>7</sup>, from the experimental group, answered as follows<sup>8</sup>:

*"- Hello, Lazarus! Where have you been? You are late!*

*- What can I say, guys, I was waiting for the rain to stop!*

*- Well, you missed a great scene: listen: while we were drinking our coffee, we overheard an interesting conversation. It all began when a grey-haired, tall guy, came near a quiet man who was drinking sage, sitting on the table next to us. Although they didn't know each other, the tall guy asked the other one to take him along on his journey to Crete. At first he was surprised, but then he saw that he was special. He made tasty soups and he enjoyed life. It is worth mentioning that the quiet man asked him to sit with him and we saw the grey-haired guy ordering rum instead of sage. Moreover, we heard about the several part-time jobs he said he had done and that he had beaten up his boss, just because he felt like doing so. He was saying that his biggest love was the santouri, in his happy and sad times he plays santouri and, you won't believe this, that live wire, who had such passion for santouri and freedom, has a family! We also had the chance to listen to him playing the santouri. Finally, the man in the next table decided to take him along in his journey. But they are so different...*

*- Well, you know, opposites attract. And what is the name of the stranger?*

*- Alexis Zorbas".*

The students of this team, in their attempt to interpret the text, seem to have adequately comprehended the characters of the two heroes, especially the character of Zorbas. They have learned how to observe and utilize the heroes'

external features, their actions and their ideas, in order to deeply understand the heroes' ethos, character and state of mind. They focus on essential points, even when these concern details (e.g. they observed the fact that Zorbas ordered rum instead of sage and evaluated it accordingly). Moreover, they seem to have learned how to observe the scenery ("*I was waiting for the rain to stop*" – in the first paragraph of the passage it is mentioned that it was raining in the beginning). The students have also realized the uniqueness in Zorbas' personality. Finally, they have spotted one of the basic strategies used in literary texts: the strategy of opposite characters, which helps the heroes' personalities emerge and stand out ("*Well, you know, opposites attract*"). These accomplishments come as a result of the fact that the students used a set of interpretive strategies: focusing on the characters and comparing them, observing the scenery (time and place) and keeping track of the plot. In other words, the students altogether *chose* to focus on narratology features, in order to approach the text in a meaningful way. This set of interpretive strategies concerns the *processes* that lead to valid interpretations, as they were described in the *Introduction* of the present study.

The following answer written by a student from the control group, also exemplifies the average level in terms of interpretive validity and variability:

*"- Welcome, Takis. Have a seat... what's new? Hear me out ... a while ago, two gentlemen were sitting here, having a conversation.*

*- So, what of it?*

*- They were two strangers, who started talking. The one was spontaneous and witty, and he was straightforward and he wanted the other guy to take him with him on a journey. The other one was calm, cautious, he was weighing things. And, deep inside, he wanted to take him along, this old man with his callous hands and his sparkling eyes. He was probably fascinated by his straightforwardness and his ideologies. And he will probably take him with him, although they are different. However, he had an opinion about everything and I was fascinated by him, as well.*

Although this student seems to have perceived the basic aspects of the two heroes' characters, as well as the differences between them, it can be observed that her description is not as deep and comprehensive as the one made by the *Athena* team. She mainly focuses on superficial aspects (e.g. "his straightforwardness", a term that is taken from the text as it is), she is not utilizing basic text information (e.g. Zorbas' passion for *santouri*) and she cannot focus on one of the main characteristics of the hero, that is, his passion for life and his tendency to *feel* first and *think* afterwards. Even though she uses more or less the same interpretive strategies as the students who worked in a group, the implementation is carried out in a rather careless and superficial way.

The examples presented above are representative of the differences between group work and individual work in all 7 teachings. Students of the control group usually – but not always – tried to make an interpretive comment. However, in every case, interpretations that came as a result of team work (which applies to the students of the experimental group) were more valid, more variable and they clearly took into account more textual data.

Another comment concerns the validity of the results presented so far. One could claim that the answers composed by the teams in the control group do not represent the interpretations of all team members; since the teams were heterogeneous, the answers could be just the work of the best student in the



team, or the product of the cooperation of 2-3 good students. As it was mentioned in the *Method* chapter, we focused on the establishment of an environment that would ensure true collaboration within the teams by setting common goals, observing team work, providing feedback on each team's collaborative performance etc. Based on our observation of the team work during all teaching sessions, as well as on the data gathered by the observation sheets and our field notes, we came to the conclusion that 4 out of 5 teams in the control group developed true collaboration; everybody contributed to the conversation and the team members seemed to have developed a strong *community identity* (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Only one of the teams presented signs of dysfunction, since the weaker students were also quite introverted and could not manage to keep up with the rest of the group.

Overall, our first research hypothesis, according to which students who work in groups end up with more valid and variable literary interpretations than students who work individually, is confirmed by our results.

#### **Correlation between Teaching Strategy and Individual Performance in the Development of Interpretive Strategies**

Two data sources were used to test the second hypothesis. First, the performance of students of the experimental and the control group on the pretest and the posttest was compared. Second, we compared their grades in the first question of the worksheets, which was individually answered by students of both groups. Table 2 presents means and standard deviations of students' grades in literary text interpretation for the Pretest and the Posttest, comparing individual performance between the experimental group and the control group.

**Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations for the Development of Interpretive Strategies by Students of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in the Pretest and the Posttest.**

Interpretation	Group			
	Experimental (N=24)		Control (N=22)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pretest	3.80	2.46	4.26	3.70
Posttest	4.02	1.83	3.70	1.60

*Note.* Grades are from 1 to 10.

Data from table 2 indicate that the experimental group scored lower than the control group in the pretest (3.80 versus 4.26) and higher than the control group in the posttest (4.02 versus 3.70). ANOVA showed that these differences were not statistically significant: for the differences in the pretest grades between the two groups,  $F$  was 0.434,  $p = 0.514$ . For the differences in the posttest grades between the two groups,  $F$  was 0.375,  $p = 0.543$  (probability standards were set at 0.05). For our second hypothesis to be confirmed, we would expect to get two findings: first, a non-significant difference in the pretest, so that equality in performance could be demonstrated, supporting, thus, the study's validity, and

second, a significant difference in the posttest, in favor of the experimental group, to support the argument that collaborative learning raises individual performance. Our first expectation was met, but the second expectation was not. However, although the difference in the posttest was not statistically significant, it should be pointed out that the direction of the correlation between the independent and the dependent variable was the one predicted by the hypothesis, that is, students of the experimental group scored higher in the posttest. In fact, we observe a reverse in student performance: the control group scored higher in the pretest and lower in the posttest; still, these differences might be due to random factors. An ANCOVA was also run to test whether student performance in the posttest was affected by individual performance *before* the intervention. Performance in the posttest was used as the dependent variable; the teaching strategy was the independent variable, with performance in the pretest as covariate. Table 3 presents the results.

**Table 3: Analysis of Covariance Summary Table of the Development of Interpretive Strategies in the Posttest, by Teaching Strategy and Performance in the Pretest.**

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	$\eta^2$
Teaching Strategy	1.180	1	1.180	0.433	0.515	0.012
Pretest	17.122	1	17.122	6.275	0.017	0.148
Error	98.234	36	2.729			
Total	124.375	39				

The model on Table 3 describes the difference of mean grades for the development of interpretive strategies in the posttest between the experimental and the control group, controlling for the development of interpretive strategies in the pretest. Again, the effect of the teaching strategy on the posttest performance is not statistically significant. On the contrary, performance in the pretest highly correlates with performance in the posttest ( $p = 0.017$ ).

It was considered necessary to use another data source in order to check our hypothesis. The mean scores in the first question of the students' discussion sheets, which was answered individually by students of both the control and the experimental group, were also examined. This was considered to be a valid data source, because a measurement which occurs regularly during the school year, in the form of an activity that takes place during a teaching session, may give a more complete and systematic picture of students' ability to develop interpretive strategies than a written test which takes place only twice a year. Table 4 presents means and standard deviations of students' grades in literary text interpretation for all 7 teaching sessions, comparing individual performance of students of both groups.

**Table 4: Means and Standard Deviations for the Development of Interpretive Strategies by Students of the Experimental Group and the Control Group in all 7 Teaching Sessions (Comparing Individual Work between the Two Groups).**

Individual Interpretation	Group			
	Experimental (N=24)		Control (N=22)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
1 <sup>st</sup> teaching session	2.41	1.22	2.39	1.09
2 <sup>nd</sup> teaching session	2.68	1.12	2.68	1.19
3 <sup>rd</sup> teaching session	2.97	1.49	2.15	1.18
4 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	3.45	1.18	2.83	1.28
5 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	2.56	1.04	2.44	0.96
6 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	3.17	1.77	2.73	1.28
7 <sup>th</sup> teaching session	3.41	1.13	3.04	1.18
Total	2.87	1.08	2.60	1.00

*Note.* Grades are from 1 to 5.

It can be observed that both groups started with almost equal average grades for the first two teaching sessions, but from the third one until the last one, the experimental group was consistently ahead. We ran an ANOVA again to compare the average grades between the two groups for each teaching session separately. ANOVA showed that these differences were not statistically significant, except for the third teaching session, where  $F = 4.056$ ,  $p = 0.05$ . However, for the total average of all 7 teaching sessions (2.87 for the experimental group and 2.60 for the control group),  $F$  was 0.903, which was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.347$ ).

Therefore, the second hypothesis was not confirmed by our findings. However, we could say that our results demonstrate a *tendency* for a positive correlation between collaborative learning and individual performance in the development of interpretive strategies.

## Discussion

Our results set the ground for certain inferences and remarks. Initially, our first research hypothesis, according to which students who work in small groups end up with more valid and variable literary interpretations than students who work individually, was confirmed by our results. The positive

effects of small-group work on the development of interpretive strategies are mainly visible during the discussion of the literary text in small groups. This procedure seems to be the one that makes a difference, compared to teacher-centered instruction. The genuine and autonomous interpretive effort takes place during small group work. Students who work in groups attempt a deeper and more insightful interpretation of the literary text, by carefully observing and analyzing textual and/or non-textual data. There are various possible explanations to this phenomenon. Students are not afraid to express their views, since they are not exposed to whole class and teacher criticism (see Nystrand, Gamoran & Heck, 1993; Alvermann et al., 1996). As a result, small group discussion provides students with access to a greater variety of opinions, perspectives and interpretations of the literary text. Rosenblatt's (1995) view about the variability of interpretations seems to be confirmed here. The others bring their own experiences and interpretations to the discussion and the whole reading experience is richer than the one provided by individual reading. In addition, the use of an instrument like the worksheets given to our students, based on the hermeneutic circle, inviting them to approach literary texts in terms of real life situations, seemed to support this effort importantly.

The second hypothesis was not confirmed by our findings. The supremacy of students who work in small groups over those who are taught with direct instruction, is not as visible when students are asked to interpret literary texts individually. Results favor the experimental group again, but not to a statistically significant level. Other research has showed similar results (e.g. Kucan & Beck, 2003). Why is this happening? An explanation for this asymmetry between the experimental group's performance during group work and during individual work may lie within what is described as *situated cognition*. According to the situated cognition concept, knowledge is basically "situated", not independent; it is partly the product of the activity, the environment and the culture within which it is developed (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1988). Therefore, when a certain knowledge or ability – like the development of interpretive strategies – is acquired within a certain learning context – like small group discussion – is it so implicit that it can be successfully transferred within a different context, for example during an individual reading or a test? All teachers must at some point have observed students who seem to have fully comprehended the lesson during the teaching session, but have great difficulty in writing a report about it at home. This is what C. Bereiter (1997) refers to as the problem of knowledge *transfer*: "What we learn in one situation we often fail to apply in another" (Bereiter, p. 288). However, our data, especially the ones testing the students' improvement overtime, favored the experimental group in all cases, even though statistical significance did not occur.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

The present study is a small scale experiment. Due to the small sample, the study's basic restriction lies in its external validity. Moreover, as with every quasi-experimental design, the participants were not chosen through random sampling; intact groups were used. Therefore, although the groups used were similar regarding certain crucial variables (age, academic performance, socio-economic background, the teacher), and thus some confidence could be placed

in the conclusions drawn, the results should be still interpreted and generalized with caution. (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Further research concerning the kind of small-group experiences and environments fostering the development of valid and variable literary interpretations might be revealing different dimensions of improvement of teaching literature. Moreover, the question about individual improvement as a result of small-group work needs to be further explored.

## Conclusion

Our findings showed that small group discussion enhances the development of interpretive strategies. The finding is of more importance given that the State of Greece, in which the current study was conducted, differs from many European nations in terms of school culture (less collectivist) and the organization of the educational system (a more centralized system) (Dimaras, 1995; Skourtou, & Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2003). Such an educational system seems discouraging regarding teachers' and students' engagement in innovative efforts. Small-group discussion can be a valuable instrument in the hands of a teacher who has difficulties teaching students how to interpret literary texts or wishes to support them to better respond to literature. Regarding the notion of interpretive strategies, it is a useful concept for teachers who are interested in working towards that direction. Small-group discussion seems to help students use the interpretive skills inherent in them, by enhancing active learning and peer interaction, and by avoiding the imposition of a single interpretation. Therefore, this study can be of practical value for literature teachers in secondary schools.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> In particular, we reviewed the publications from 1995 until today of the following journals: *Review of Educational Issues*, *Pedagogical Review*, *Pedagogical Discourse*, *Pedagogical Review*, *Philologist* and *Philological*.

<sup>2</sup> The research work of the Human Computer Interaction team of the University of Patras is described in detail in the University website: [http://hci.ece.upatras.gr/index.php?id=23&option=com\\_content&task=view&lang=iso-8859-7](http://hci.ece.upatras.gr/index.php?id=23&option=com_content&task=view&lang=iso-8859-7)

<sup>3</sup> We are making a distinction here between *comprehension* and *interpretation*, considering as *comprehension* of texts what Purves & Rippere (1968) describe as "perception", that is, description of a text, including retelling and summarizing. *Interpretation*, on the other hand, is considered here as what Gibson (2006) roughly describes as "the activity of bringing to light what a literary work is trying to say" (p.440). Culler (1997, p. 64) makes a very clear distinction between comprehension and interpretation, by giving an example: suppose we are asked: "What is *Hamlet* about?" If we answer: "It is about a prince in Denmark", we are not interpreting the text. But if we answer " *Hamlet* is about the breakdown of the Elizabethan world order", then we are engaging on an interpretive action.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of *interpretive communities* was introduced by Stanley Fish (1980), in order to explain why two or more readers share the same interpretations (since there is no such thing as an objective text, according to the reader-response theory) and why one single reader regularly changes his/her interpretations. Interpretive communities consist of readers who share interpretive strategies. These strategies exist before the act of reading and, therefore, they determine the form of the reading object – the text – rather than the other way around, as it is usually supposed to be. This explains why different readers give the same interpretations (they belong to the same interpretive community) and why one single reader uses different interpretive strategies and, thus, gives different interpretations (he/she moves between multiple communities). Interpretive communities grow or deminish and people move from one to another (Fish, pp. 171-172).

<sup>5</sup> For further reference, the relevant document is (translated in English from Greek): *Guidelines for the teaching of philological courses in junior high school (academic year 2003-2004)*. Ministry of National Education and Religion, Pedagogical Institute, Department of Secondary Education, pp. 174-217. These guidelines are still used by teachers today.

<sup>6</sup> Santouri: a traditional musical instrument

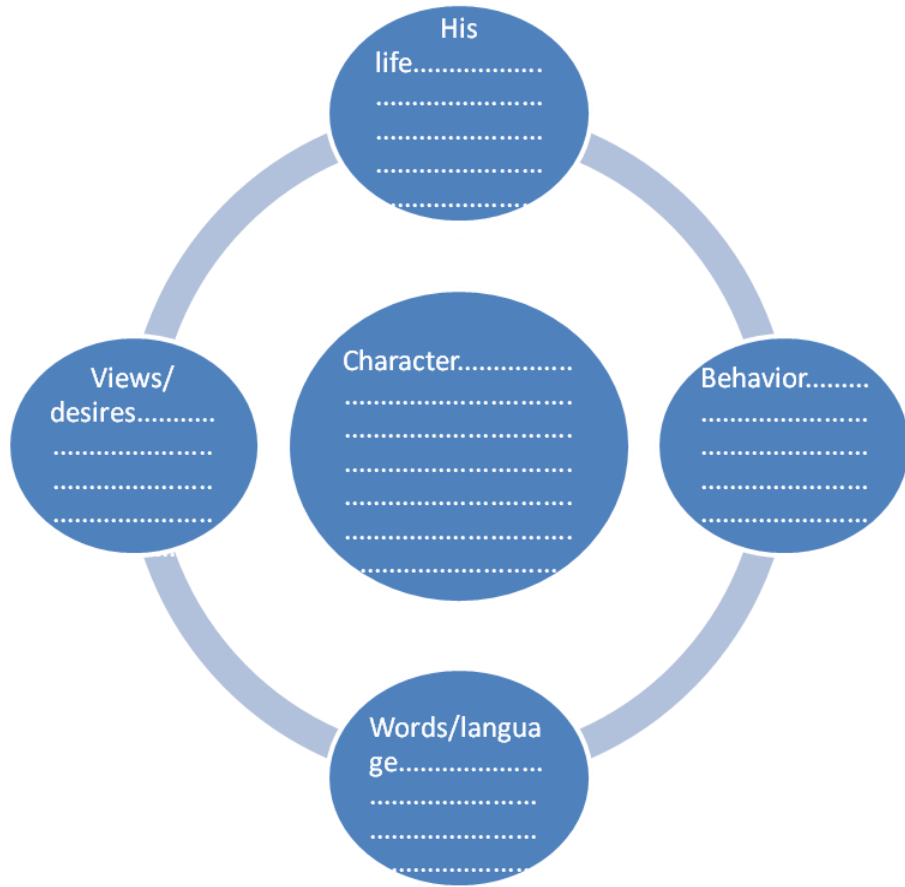
<sup>7</sup> Students in the experimental group named their teams as follows: *Hermes*, *Victory*, *Panthers*, *Athena* and *Aris*.

<sup>8</sup> All student answers were translated from Greek, maintaining the students' language and style. Possible mistakes in grammar, syntax or expression were not corrected.





b) Try to make Alexis Zorbas' profile, by completing the diagram below:



3) Suppose, now, that you are a group of sailors drinking their coffee in the same coffee shop as the writer, sitting on the next table. You are present at the scene of Zorbas' arrival and you are eavesdropping on the whole conversation that follows. After a while, another friend of yours arrives and sits with you. Describe to him, as a group now, the whole scene of the two men's acquaintance and conversation, commenting on their characters and stressing out some of their ideas that might have impressed you. Finally, tell him if, in your opinion, the writer decided to take Zorbas with him and why.

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## Appendix B

### B1. Pretest

**Text:** *The Companions in Hades*, by George Seferis

*fools, who ate the cattle of Helios Hyperion;  
but he deprived them of the day of their return.  
– Odyssey*

Since we still had some hardtack  
how stupid of us  
to go ashore and eat  
the Sun's slow cattle,

for each was a castle  
you'd have to battle  
forty years, till you'd become  
a hero and a star!

On the earth's back we hungered,  
but when we'd eaten well  
we fell to these lower regions  
mindless and satisfied.

(Translated By Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard)

### Questions

Question 1.a. What do you think the Companions in Hades, the Sun's Cattle, and their story symbolize? b. On what evidence from the text is your answer based?

Question 2. Who do you think the "companions" are speaking to? What are their words aiming at? Are there any clues in the poem that lead you to this conclusion?

### B2. Posttest

**Text:** *To have taken the trouble*, by K.P. Cavafy

I'm broke and practically homeless.  
This fatal city, Antioch,  
has devoured all my money:  
this fatal city with its extravagant life.

But I'm young and in excellent health.  
Prodigious master of things Greek,  
I know Aristotle and Plato through and through,  
poets, orators, or anyone else you could mention.  
I have some idea about military matters  
and friends among the senior mercenaries.  
I also have a foot in the administrative world;  
I spent six months in Alexandria last year:  
I know (and this is useful) something about what goes on there—  
the scheming of Kakergetis, his dirty deals, and the rest of it.

So I consider myself completely qualified  
to serve this country,  
my beloved fatherland, Syria.

Whatever job they give me,  
I'll try to be useful to the country. That's my intention.  
But if they frustrate me with their maneuvers –  
we know them, those smart operators: no need to say more here –  
if they frustrate me, it's not my fault.

I'll approach Zabinas first,  
and if that idiot doesn't appreciate me,  
I'll go to his rival, Grypos.  
And if that imbecile doesn't take me on,  
I'll go straight to Hyrkanos.

One of the three will want me anyway.

And my conscience is quiet  
about my not caring which one I chose:  
the three of them are equally bad for Syria.

But, a ruined man, it's not my fault.  
I'm only trying, poor devil, to make ends meet.  
The almighty gods ought to have taken the trouble  
to create a fourth, an honest man.  
I would gladly have gone along with him.

### Questions

Question 1. The person who speaks in the poem is telling us how he plans to serve his country. What do these plans tell us about his ethics? On what evidence from the text is your answer based?

Question 2. "But, a ruined man ... with him": Write a paragraph in which you will describe what, in your opinion, is the meaning of this verse. Which are the textual data that lead you to your conclusion?

### Appendix C

**Instructions for student behavior during group work** (adopted by Johnson & Johnson, 2009a, p. 42)

- i) Be critical of ideas, not people.
- ii) Remember that we are in this together.
- iii) Encourage everyone to participate.
- iv) Listen carefully to everyone's ideas, even if you do not agree.
- v) Rephrase something somebody said, if it was not clear.
- vi) Try to understand all sides of the issue.
- vii) First we express all the ideas and then we put them together.