

# Literary Texts through Transactional Theory: Adult Pedagogy and Research

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the application of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory in teaching literature to adult learners. The purpose is to explore how this approach supports active reading and interpretive engagement. A classroom-based implementation using a literary text was combined with questionnaire-based data collection to evaluate learner responses. The findings show increased participation, improved comprehension, and stronger emotional engagement with texts. The results suggest that the approach supports reflective learning and enhances reading motivation among adult learners. The study highlights the need for further research with larger samples to confirm its broader educational value.*

**Keywords:** Transactional Theory, Literature Didactics, Reader Response Criticism, Adult Education, Reader Engagement, Literary Interpretation, Adult Literacy

## 1. Introduction

The teaching of Literature, perhaps more than any other school subject, has long been a field of tension among linguistic, national, socio-political, and other aims attributed to it as a discipline, as well as among the theoretical approaches that shape the school-based analysis of literary texts. Over recent decades, the shift toward reader-response theories has challenged the traditional sacralization of the text—already preceded by the displacement of the author- and has brought to the foreground the active role of the reader in the construction of meaning. All the reader response theories have the following two basic premises: Firstly, that there is no meaning in literature without the reader, and, secondly, that the reader does not merely receive the meaning created in the literary text, but is involved in its production (Suleiman & Crosman, 1980; Tyson, 2006, p.170).

This study includes three main sections: a summary of the theoretical ideas of Rosenblatt's theory and the main principles of adult education, an example of its application in practice, and the results and discussion. The aim of this study is to investigate how Rosenblatt's transactional theory can be applied in educational practice, while addressing the following research questions: how does reader engagement influence meaning-making, and what are the implications of this approach for the teaching of literature in adult educational contexts? It should be noted that, although Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory has been employed in studies within Greek school education, there is no clear evidence of its application in formal adult education in Greece (Aravani, 2012)

## 2. Literature Review

Application of Transactional Theory in teaching adults is especially intriguing. Firstly, it places emphasis on the process of constant interplay of text and reader. Secondly, adults possess a certain amount of experience that differs

significantly from that of their younger counterparts, who have already been investigated through the lens of Transactional Theory. Research carried out among primary and secondary school pupils (for example: Langer, 2018, pp. 27-36; Benton, 2009, p. 157; Galda & Liang, 2003, p. 269; Swartz, 2000, pp. 146-148; Karolidis, 2000, pp. 95-103; Langer, 1997, pp. 74-76; Probst, 1994, pp. 37-38) reveals that this theory is capable of serving as an effective pedagogical instrument enabling dialogue and building learning communities. Application of Transactional Theory to adults may provide further theoretical contribution not only to teaching practice in general but also to adult literacy specifically and to literature classes more generally.

### 2.1 Louise M. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

Louise M. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory is a key approach within Reader-Response theories. It first emerged in 1938 as a reaction to New Criticism with her book *Literature as Exploration*, but was initially overshadowed by the dominance of New Criticism and Formalism. In recent years, however, it has regained prominence.

Rosenblatt (1970; 1978; 1993), drawing on the concept of "transaction" from J. Dewey, situates her theory of reading within a pragmatic critique of traditional epistemology, between subject and reader and object and text in the process of meaning-making. Her theory posits that the interpretation of a text arises from the "transaction" between reader and text—a dynamic, equal, and personal encounter. The text serves as a stimulus, activating the reader's past and present experiences, both literary and personal, and functions as a "blueprint" that guides the reading process through hints and cues, which intersect with the reader's "selective attention" (Rosenblatt 1970, pp. 11-12; 1978, pp. 42-43). Selective attention involves the reader's active process of choosing, organizing, and synthesizing, shaped by their stance toward the text and their responses to the text's openness and constraints.

If a reader adopts an “effluent” stance, the focus is on what can be extracted from the text, such as information. In contrast, an “aesthetic” stance involves engaging with the text as a personal experience, going beyond the literal meaning of words to interpret the text with empathy- the reader immerses in its ideas, characters, questions, and emotions. This approach fosters a dynamic relationship with the text, transforming it into a “poem” or a “work” through a process of evocation and interpretation (Rosenblatt 1970, pp. 30- 38; 1978, pp. 48-53). In other words, the reader draws on memories, experiences, knowledge, and emotions triggered by the text to construct an active, individualized interpretation.

The reader’s purpose or focus determines the choice between effluent and aesthetic reading. Rosenblatt emphasizes that these stances are not opposites but points along a continuum. Reading may begin effluently and shift toward the aesthetic, while most readings fall somewhere in the middle.

The text itself does not guarantee meaning; elements such as dense ideas or emotions may be overlooked or remain insignificant. The uniqueness and dynamism of the reading event- the transaction between reader and text- mean that even the same reader may interpret a text differently depending on personal and contextual circumstances. Likewise, meaning can vary between readers according to their experiences and reading contexts. Thus, meaning is not inherent in the text nor solely in the reader’s mind- it “happens” in the act of reading as an “event in time” (Rosenblatt 1970, p. 38; 1978, pp. 153-155; 1988, p. 4; 1964, p. 126; Schrijvers et al., 2019)

Nevertheless, the reader’s work is completed when the interpretation is organized and evaluated for its relationship to the text, to which he must remain “faithful” (Rosenblatt 1970, p. 11; 1989, p. 36). Fidelity does not suppress subjective interpretation nor imply a single “correct” reading dictated by authorial intention or textual autonomy. Rather, it guides the reader’s dialogue with the text, much like fidelity ensures a meaningful conversation with another person.

Rosenblatt did not propose a rigid teaching model but outlined principles for a holistic approach to reading- a “new reading practice” (Rosenblatt 1989, pp. ix, 34). Key pedagogical guidelines, widely adopted in recent curricula, include: a) the teacher as a mediator, b) encouraging students’ spontaneous, free responses as starting points for discussion, and c) fostering intellectual and emotional engagement, reflection on one’s own and others’ responses, and a deeper understanding of the text, self, and peers (Rosenblatt 1970, p. 61; Politis, 1996).

Rosenblatt argued that traditional teaching and assessment methods tend to encourage effluent reading and do little to foster a personal relationship with literature. In particular, she noted that contextual information (biographical, historical, or terminological) should be introduced after students’ experiential interest is engaged, as these elements are not the primary aim of literary reading and can lead toward an effluent approach (Rosenblatt 1956, pp. 71-72).

## 2.2 Adult Education

The development of adult education as an area of study started in the beginning of the twentieth century with the objective of promoting the intellectual development of adults as well as helping them to develop professionally, culturally, and socially. Adult education has become a very significant tool for tackling social problems like migration, racism, unemployment, and social exclusion in today’s society. (Hill et al., 2023)

Several scholars have offered various definitions of adult education. According to Rogers, adult education can be viewed as “education in mature adulthood,” which means education that “is provided in relation to mature people, on the basis of their sense of responsibility and social experience” (Kokkos, 2008, p. 31). In this regard, it can be stated that educational courses aimed at adults “need to respect and develop the maturity of those who freely take part in them” (Rogers, 1999, p. 76).

The term adult learner is one of the fundamental elements of adult education. Literature on the issue reveals two main concepts of adulthood. Firstly, age alone is not sufficient to consider a person as an adult; both the individual himself/herself and other people need to see him/her “as an adult” (Kokkos, 2008, p. 29). Secondly, adulthood presupposes a specific development pattern, when the individual strives for his/her “personal growth, perspective, and self-confidence” (Rogers, 1999, p. 73). In turn, adulthood is also affected by society’s expectations regarding a person’s roles and personal development.

It is necessary to comprehend the special features and needs of adult learners, especially when considering the fact that such people’s enrollment into educational programs is often optional.

Each adult person is undergoing constant personal evolution. Thus, learning is a dynamic process during which people utilize their past experiences and stages of life for personal evolution. All adult learners come into the educational process with certain experiences and value systems that have determined their views and, sometimes, stereotypical thinking.

As mentioned by Rogers (1999, p. 197), each adult learner has “predetermined intentions” before entering education. Adults may engage in learning because of their genuine interest in it or as a result of social reasons. Besides, they have certain expectations concerning the educational process that distinguishes one learner from another. Thus, it is important to identify learners’ perceptions of and expectations from learning in the early stages of the educational process.

### Barriers to Learning for Adult Learners

Adult learners may encounter a variety of barriers during their participation in educational programs, which can hinder the successful completion of their studies. Addressing these barriers effectively- along with providing appropriate support from educators- plays a crucial role in the overall outcome of the learning process. According to Kokkos (2008, p. 85), such barriers may include inadequate organization of educational

programs, the social and family responsibilities of adult learners, and the relatively stable personality structures that individuals bring to the learning environment.

In addition, attention is often drawn to so-called “internal barriers” (Kokkos, 2008, p. 85), which are directly related to the learners themselves.

- Barriers associated with prior knowledge and values: Adult learners have developed a body of knowledge and beliefs through their life experiences. These experiences shape their attitudes and influence the ways in which they interpret and respond to new information.
- Barriers related to psychological factors: Most adult learners have already developed the core characteristics of their personality. These may include low self-esteem regarding their abilities and a lack of confidence in their personal capacities, factors that can lead to anxiety or apprehension in learning situations.

From the outset of the educational process, educators should adopt appropriate pedagogical approaches that enable adult learners to recognize potential barriers to their learning and to develop effective strategies for addressing them.

Indeed, one of the important goals of adult education is to make individuals critically evaluate all previous ideas that they had before. It is only through reflective learning that adults can re-evaluate their past perspectives and slowly develop new systems of beliefs and practices in interpreting and reacting to life events and experiences.

### 3. Methodology

To examine the ideas of adult learners about teaching based on the concept of Transaction Theory, questionnaire-based quantitative data were collected. As a result, the information obtained allowed drawing certain conclusions related to the possible implementation of the theoretical ideas into practice and their application in the context of teaching literature to adults. The sample consisted of 32 adult students (20 women and 12 men). All students were over 18 years old (8 students between 18-25, 4 students between 26-40, 20 students over 40 years old).

The implementation of Rosenblatt’s theory in a second-grade upper secondary school class (Grade 11) with adult learners, from the beginning of the school year, aims to foster a lived, experiential relationship with literature, developing reading and text-decoding skills, and more broadly cultivating a love of reading. This approach takes into account the fact that the group consists of adult working students who had interrupted their schooling several years earlier and have now returned to education. It is acknowledged that this group has limited familiarity and fluency with metalinguistic literary terminology, as well as limited time to devote to literary study.

Considering these factors as a key reason to prioritize free communication between the learner-reader and the literary text and to emphasize reading enjoyment, we followed a teaching trajectory similar to that proposed by scholars who have studied Rosenblatt’s work (indicatively: Politis, 2003; 2017; Kalogirou & Vissaraki, 2005). The implementation is

also aligned with the national Curriculum Guidelines (Government Gazettes Issue B, 4911/31.12.2019 and Issue B, 2953/04.05.2023) and includes the following stages: a preliminary stage with a first reading by the teacher; individual encounters with the text through personal reading; discussion and sharing of individual responses and their comparison; and, finally, overall evaluation, reflection, and discussion of interpretive approaches and the reception and impact of the text.

The short story by Antonis Samarakis, “*Hope Wanted*” (*Ziteitai elpis*), which was used as a teaching example of the application of Transactional Theory, belongs to the homonymous collection published in 1954. It is widely regarded as the author’s most read collection read collection and has been included among the books distributed in secondary education with the aim of fostering reading culture. The text is a representative example of Samarakis’s thematic concerns and narrative style: a sharp commentary on the contemporary postwar world, rendered with cinematic vividness and incisive insight, capturing the subdued yet anxious atmosphere of the Cold War and the resulting existential impasses.

The protagonist of the story is sitting in a café, reading a newspaper. The panorama of news, from international military conflicts to everyday current affairs and the social column- feeds his growing unease. To his despair over widespread suffering, the contradictions of the postwar world, and the indifference and complacency of the average person are added to his own personal dead ends and anxieties. The existential crisis he experiences culminates in his decision to publish a newspaper advertisement bearing the terse and symbolic message: “HOPE WANTED.”

The title of the text surprised the student-readers, who commented on it spontaneously. The guiding question is: “What kind of expectations does the title create for you? What do you imagine you are about to read?” elicited a range of responses, which served as a bridge to the reading of the text.

The teacher’s initial reading was accompanied by instructions for students to note passages that struck them, puzzled them, or displeased them. This was followed by individual silent reading with the same directive. As expected, students initially approached the text through an efferent stance. The concise, abrupt style and fast-paced narration encourage primarily informational reading. The image of the café setting is easily and immediately formed, as the author constructs a scene on which the narrative “camera” remains focused from the moment the protagonist enters. External action is minimal and limited to café activities café-related activities that initially fail to capture the reader’s interest.

The discussion began with students’ spontaneous comments, which could be seen as responses to questions such as: “What happens in the story? Where is the protagonist? Is he doing anything?” However, students quickly focused on the protagonist’s thoughts and emotions, as the author skillfully builds a contrast between the commonplace image of the café and the protagonist’s internal intellectual and psychological turmoil. It is toward this turmoil that the reader’s selective attention shifts. The discussion focused on the observation

that the content of the news -from trivial and indifferent items to the most tragic and threatening - gradually provokes and intensifies the protagonist's anxiety.

Revisiting the news headlines, students identified the contrast between items reflecting everyday normality (the small and insignificant) and those projecting the Cold War atmosphere and the threat of global conflict, which fuel the protagonist's existential anguish. They concluded that the juxtaposition of news items is not merely an interesting narrative technique but corresponds to and reinforces the opposing forces within the setting: on the one hand, the complacent café patrons and the external world of everyday life; on the other, the desperate protagonist, trapped in anxiety and frustration. Thus, they recognized that the initially indifferent setting conceals a deeper significance closely connected to the text's core messages.

Expanding the discussion further, in line with Rosenblatt's emphasis on inviting students to articulate what they see and feel while reading, the following questions were posed: "What do you think as you read these news items? What do you think about the protagonist who reads them? Why?" The discussion extended to contemporary news, culminating in the observation that "today's news is harsher and more shocking, yet we seem to have become accustomed to horror." Regarding the protagonist, students concluded that while the news contributes to his existential dead end, it is compounded by his personal fears and disappointments. Particular emphasis was placed on the recollection of the medical incident, where the doctor's statement about the patient ("There is no hope anymore!") acquires a symbolic dimension for the protagonist, representing the impending death of humanity as a whole. Students noted that he feels isolated and exposed to his anxiety, which is amplified by the untroubled normality of the world around him, ultimately symbolizing any individual who thinks deeply and feels powerless in a threatening world.

The ending of the story made a strong impression, seen as the culmination of a troubled consciousness that reaches its peak in the desperate, perhaps even ironic, advertisement "HOPE WANTED," which closes the cycle initiated by the same phrase in the title. Further discussion, guided by questions such as "What do you think the protagonist is seeking through this advertisement? What thoughts does it provoke? How do you feel about the protagonist, and why?", led to the conclusion that the protagonist stands in opposition to the complacency and indifference of society. He transcends the boundaries of the self, assumes the burden of an anxiety that ought to be shared by all, and denounces social apathy by adopting the very format of the advertisements he had been reading. At the same time, as students noted, the advertisement is also a cry of anguish over his personal impasse, intensifying their empathy toward him.

During the final reflection on the overall process, the text was evaluated very positively. Its themes were considered enduringly relevant, while the narrative technique and the simple, everyday setting were seen as effectively capturing the reader's interest and directing it toward the internal action of the text. With regard to its content, described as pessimistic yet realistic, students concluded that it prompted them to

reflect critically on the fact that living conditions in the modern world have not substantially improved in the seventy years since the text was written, and to question whether meaningful improvement is still possible.

#### 4. Results

The design and implementation of a questionnaire constitute a task of particular importance for the success of a research study (Rontos & Papanis, 2007). Based on this premise, at the end of the first semester a questionnaire was administered to the students of the class in order to examine the effectiveness of the method applied up to that point, as well as its future prospects.

The main findings are presented below, based on the analysis of the collected questionnaire data using descriptive statistical methods supported by contemporary statistical software.

A. Students expressed a strong preference for not being provided with the meaning and purpose of a literary text by the teacher from the outset. Instead, they preferred to arrive at these interpretations through an open, active, and participatory discussion within the classroom.

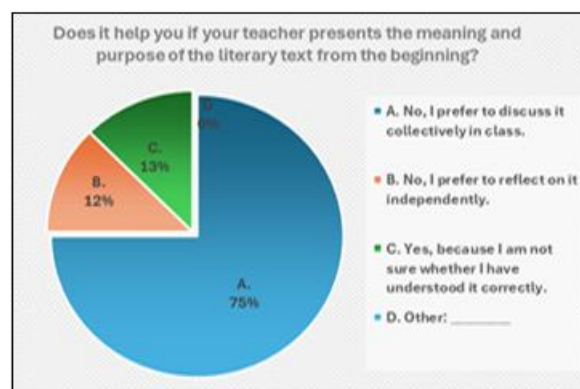


Figure 1: Mode of Presenting the Meaning and Purpose of the Text

Specifically (Figure 1), 75% of the participants prefer that the meaning and purpose of the text be discussed collectively by the whole class, while 12% prefer to be given time to reflect individually. In contrast, only 13% report that they find it easier when the teacher presents the meaning and purpose of a text at the beginning of the teaching unit.

B. The proposed teaching technique provides opportunities for the active participation of students (Figure 2). A very high percentage of students agree that during the current school year:

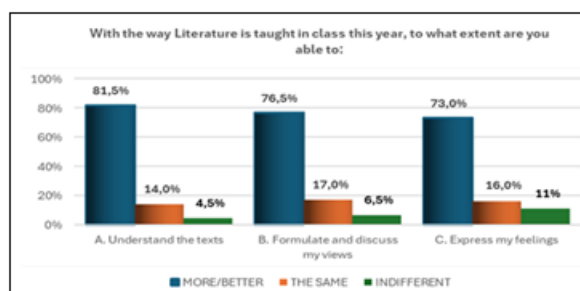
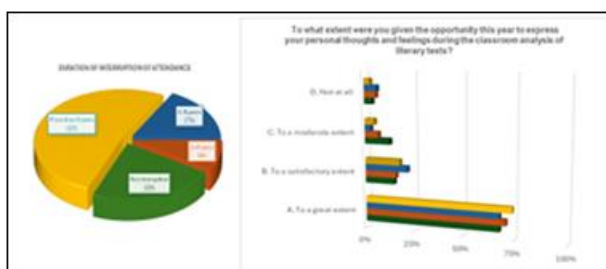


Figure 2: Advantages of the Teaching Method

Students report several benefits associated with the proposed teaching method. In particular, they indicate that:

- They understand the literary texts taught more effectively (87.5%),
- They are given the opportunity to engage in active and participatory discussions and to express their own views (77.5%),
- Through the collective analysis of texts, they have the opportunity to express freely the emotions they spontaneously experience (75%), and
- They participate actively in the Modern Greek literature lesson (87.5%), which allows the teacher to create a more engaging and stimulating learning environment.

C. It is also noteworthy that the students consider the way in which literary texts are taught to be highly interesting. Specifically (Figure 3), 87.5% of the students regard the method as very or fairly interesting, while only 5.3% consider it uninteresting.



**Figure 3:** Teaching of Literature in Relation to Years of Interrupted School Attendance

If we attempt to relate students' level of interest to the length of time during which they had previously interrupted their schooling, the following observations emerge:

- The largest group of students, those who had interrupted their studies for more than eight years (52%), express very positive views (89.5%) regarding the level of interest generated by the teaching technique (very and fairly interesting).
- The group with an interruption period of four to eight years (17%) shows positive interest at a rate of 85.5%, while the group with one to four years of interruption (9%) also expresses a high level of interest (82%) in the teaching approach implemented during the current school year.
- Finally, the group of students with continuous school attendance (22%) also holds a positive view (79.5%) regarding the degree of interest generated by the teaching of literature.

D. The analysis of the questionnaire data indicates that students are provided with the opportunity to express their personal thoughts and feelings, to participate actively in the teaching process, and to achieve a deeper understanding of the literary texts being taught.



**Figure 4:** Expression of Thoughts/Emotions, Active Participation, and Comprehension

The results of the questionnaire (Figure 4) indicate that students:

- have sufficient time and feel comfortable expressing their personal thoughts and emotions (very or satisfactorily) at a rate of 85%,
- are given the opportunity to demonstrate active participation (very or satisfactorily) during the process of examining and analyzing the literary texts taught, at a rate of 91.5%, and
- are able, after completing the analysis of each literary text, to understand it (very or satisfactorily) at a very high rate (89%), which is particularly important for the learners.

## 5. Conclusions

This study shows that applying Transactional Theory in adult literature classrooms supports active engagement, critical reflection, and interpretive diversity. The findings indicate improved student participation, comprehension, and motivation. The approach appears particularly effective for learners with limited prior exposure to literature. However, the results are based on a small sample and should be interpreted cautiously. Future research with larger and more diverse groups is needed to confirm these outcomes and refine the pedagogical model.

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