

READER-RESPONSE PEDAGOGY AND CHANGES IN STUDENT STANCES IN LITERARY TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Past studies have revealed that readers usually assume an aesthetic stance when responding to literature. Yet students in schools seem to respond in more efferent ways, and this could be attributed to the efferent teaching of literature in schools. An aesthetic stance refers to paying attention to feelings and ideas that words evoke, while the efferent stance refers to reading for information. Both stances are required and valued in reading and response but the preponderance of the efferent stance among students is a concern. Often the joy of reading literature is taken away from students and replaced with efferent informational reading of literary texts. This study examines tertiary students' written literary responses before and after reader response activities of two short stories. The responses were categorized according to the efferent/aesthetic continuum by Cox and Many (1992) from levels one to five. The findings revealed that before the exposure to Reader Response, students' responses were mostly that of retelling the story with a predominantly efferent stance. After Reader Response was introduced, students still took on a predominantly efferent stance for their responses to the first story, but for the subsequent story, they began to make personal interpretations of the text. Students brought their meanings to the text and not that of the author, teacher or any critic. Implications of the study are related to the importance of reader response in literature teaching, while encouraging and valuing personal interpretation of the students.

Keywords: reader response, efferent stance, aesthetic stance

Introduction

It appears that much of the teaching of Literature from school to university is mainly directed at a particular interpretation which is deemed 'right'. Much of what is required in examinations could be the result of teachers adopting an efferent stance in teaching. Efferent responses focus on information in the text while aesthetic responses focus on feelings, attitudes and associations evoked by

the words in the text. Thamburaj (2007) states that with the literature component being included and tested in the English Language Examination, students' focus is on passing the examination with good grades. The purpose of introducing the literature component into the English Language Syllabus in 2000 and to be first tested in 2001 was to inculcate the enjoyment and appreciation for literature among students. Often with the best of intentions, the joy and serious intellectual activity of reading literature is taken away from children and replaced with required efferent or informational readings of literary texts (Rosenblatt, 1995, cited in Khaled Alazzi, 2007). This then, forms the backdrop of most teachers as they teach literature to students and as students respond more in efferent ways.

Literature Review

Reader response theory emerged as a paradigm shift from author to text-centered literary analysis to individual and personal interpretation of the individual reader as he or she transacts with the text and the environment. Rosenblatt (1938) proposed the reader's construction of meaning from the text as a unique and subjective 'event'. Individual readers brought with them their personal memories, feelings and knowledge to create their own 'poem' or meaning of the text. In this way, Rosenblatt viewed reading as a process in which the reader, with his or her past experience, beliefs, expectations and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text. Meaning is thus determined, as a result of this transaction. Thus, in the context of student responses, it is the bringing of personal meaning with emotions that moves response towards the aesthetic continuum. When teachers help students to achieve this, they are using a reader response pedagogy in the classroom. A group of people reading a common text will respond diversely because of feelings, experiences, and knowledge" (Asselin, 2000, p.3). This is what must be encouraged instead of seeking for the 'correct' answers. Guerin et al., (2003) show how multiple levels of interpretation are possible, thus enriching students' responses. Their handbook can be a source of reader response pedagogy to teachers as well as a learning guide for students.

More often than not, teachers control the talk and interpretation of a literary text, leading students toward teacher-perceived meanings (Marshall et.al., 1995). Institutional discourse and other constraints (exam oriented systems) work against students' personal response and reflection in discussion. Case studies of secondary school literature instruction revealed that teachers under perceived pressures, moved towards a less aesthetic 'school version of literature' (Zancanella, 1991, p. 27).

It has been suggested that teachers are unable to share authority for interpreting and thinking with students. British research on small group discussions outside classrooms (Barnes & Todd, 1977; Britton, 1970; Edwards & Westgate, 1987) revealed that without the teacher, students worked collaboratively and used cognitive strategies, such as exploring connections between personal knowledge and the text to create their own response and understanding. In peer-led discussions of narrative texts, upper elementary students explored interpretive problems and learned reflective reading processes to a greater degree than those in teacher-led discussions (Almasi, 1995).

Other reasons why teachers may not consider student verbal interaction as central to the teaching and learning process include the following as suggested by Cullinan (1993). Firstly, the role of the classroom talk in the learning process, and particularly in the development of literacy skills, has remained largely unknown to most classroom teachers. Secondly, teachers may be influenced by their own experiences as learners in classrooms where talk was discredited as not being conducive to thinking and learning, or was seen as a discipline problem. Cullinan (1993, p. 2) observes that 'traditionally, we have valued silent classrooms because we tend to equate silence with thinking and with productive work'. Student talk is still a controversial issue as student empowerment and issues of power have come to be addressed by educators (Myers, 1986).

Langer (1998) conducted studies over an eight year period as she involved students from pre-kindergarten through to being adult learners, who had diverse cultural, linguistic and economic backgrounds. Her studies showed that teachers must work to overcome their authoritative role in the classroom and become the teacher-enabler, in which students are supported in developing understanding.

Teachers should guide students towards the efferent-aesthetic continuum. This continuum is described in more detail under the analysis section of this paper. In order to achieve aesthetic reading, the teacher needs to be willing to act differently in the classrooms. They need to change the power relationships in the learning process in order to create an atmosphere of learning where students are willing and encouraged to talk democratically (Wilson, 1981). Rather than always being the leader of the lesson and discussion and being the sole answer holder, the teacher needs to be willing to step into the role of learner with the students. In a group discussion, the teacher's role should be that as a learner within the group, constructing new meanings with the students through statements such as 'I hadn't thought of that until (the name of student/s) mentioned it' (Whitin, 1994, p. 106).

The students need to experience literature as a work of art, rather than have the teacher reduce the art to an exercise or drill (Probst, 1994). This student connection to literature can be achieved through the students' awareness that they hold the answer to the meaning of the text rather than to submit to their teacher's meaning or that of an authority.

Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine students' responses to literary texts after they have been introduced to reader response pedagogy. The responses before and after reader response pedagogy were compared. The study also looked at some possible ways to help students move away from 'right' answers and predominantly efferent stances towards a more exploratory and meaningful way of bringing personal meaning to the text, thus allowing expression along the aesthetic stance as well.

Site and Participants

This study is located within a pre-TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) course offered at a local university. The students who enrolled in this course had completed the SPM examinations (equivalent to 'O' levels) and were eighteen to nineteen years of age. After completing the one year course, these students would proceed to a three-year degree programme in TESL. The total number of participants in the study was twenty two but only two participants were selected for analysis in this paper. The two students were chosen on the basis that both of them were very quiet and subdued in the classroom before reader response was introduced to the class. When working in groups, the two students became very vocal although not fluent in the language.

Research Design

This was a case study which looked closely at two cases. A constant comparative method was used. According to Goetz and LeCompte (1981), this method "combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed" (p.58). As social phenomena are recorded and classified, they are also compared. Thus, hypothesis generation (relationship discovery) begins with the analysis of initial observations. This process undergoes continuous refinement throughout the data collection and analysis process. In the study, the stances of the two cases were compared before and after the reader-response pedagogy was introduced. The observations of the two cases were also included for comparison. "As events are constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimension, as well as new relationships, may be discovered" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p.58). This is how findings were drawn for the cases.

Procedure

The study involved student responses to two short stories and covered a period of four weeks. Two weeks were given to students to read the stories and fill out the worksheets (see Appendix A) in the column ‘before reader response’. Another two weeks were given for the introduction of reader response activities in the classroom.

For the ‘before reader response’ activity, the students were asked to read two short stories (I Stand Here Ironing and The Story of An Hour) in the Pre-TESL course. Worksheets with two columns were given to students – on the left column was printed ‘before reader response’ and on the right column, was printed ‘after reader response’. Students were asked to write their responses to the text before exposure to reader response in the left column. The worksheets were collected by the instructor-researcher after half an hour.

For the ‘after reader response’ activity, the students were exposed to reader response theory for the first time. The researcher played the role of instructor as well as researcher. She explained the concept of reader response and encouraged students to respond freely to questions and short texts given to them. Initially the students were reluctant and shy to express their own thoughts and feelings. When they were put into groups, they were more comfortable and in a short time were constantly sharing their own views and feelings about short excerpts that were given to them to express their own feelings and views.

Students then discussed the short stories in their groups. They recorded and transcribed their discussion. The instructor-researcher walked around and joined the group as learner and researcher. After the group discussion, a class discussion followed. Students from various groups shared their understanding with the others where questions and responses were given by the students. They were then given the same worksheet as before, where they wrote their new responses on the right column which read ‘after reader response’. The worksheets were collected by the instructor-researcher after half an hour.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data consisted of the responses in the worksheets ‘before and after reader response’ interpretations (Appendix A). The group and class discussions were also transcribed to see how students’ literary responses were being reshaped by the stances taken after reader response pedagogy. The two particular cases were compared in terms of the researcher’s observations and their stances. The researcher made brief notes that were also used as a source of data. The stances were categorized according to a Five-Point Efferent - Aesthetic Continuum by

Cox and Many (1992) based on Rosenblatt's transactional theory (Appendix B). These stances are graded from left to right, from the most efferent (factual) to the most aesthetic (imaginative) reading by the two cases.

Levels 1 and 2 were clearly defined as efferent stances where level 1 comprised studying the literary elements found in the text. Level 2 was a sort of summary of what was read as it covered retelling of the story. The focus of levels 1 and 2 was strictly the text where the literary elements were identified. Level 3 contained both stances as readers go back and forth the text, checking for details as they make and alter interpretations. Level 4 is a more aesthetic stance with readers selecting a story event or character, making judgements or descriptions of what attracted them or otherwise (e.g. I enjoyed the part when...). This usually involves some emotion. The Level 5 focus is on the 'lived through' experience and emotion involved while reading the text and making personal associations to the text.

Using this continuum (Appendix B), students' written responses were categorized, and an inter-rater helped to verify the categories. Where there was dispute, it was discussed between the raters, and final decision was made with mutual agreement.

Results

An overall analysis of worksheet entries illustrated the shifts that took place between the 'before and after reader response' written responses in the reading of the two texts. Below are sample worksheets taken from two different students, which showed up a clearer and more distinct shift in stances taken between the 'before and after reader response' written responses.

In order to provide a context for the written responses to the two texts, an explanation of the plot of the short story is given, followed by a sample of the 'before and after' written response to the text. The first short story 'I Stand Here Ironing' is about a single mother's plight at a time of recession where she had to find work to support herself and her daughter, Emily. The father of her child left them, due to poverty. Emily had to be left with baby sitters, at nurseries and later, at Emily's father's relatives' home while Emily's mother had to work. Later, the mother brought Emily back but Emily had changed and became distant towards her mother and life generally. Emily's mother remarried and had children of her own. Again, Emily was neglected and on top of it, a daughter was born, who competed with Emily for attention. Emily became a recluse and lost her zest for life which she once had with her mother when she was very young.

Below is an excerpt showing the shifts in stances ‘before and after reader response’ activities are introduced in the first student’s worksheet.

Excerpt from Sample Worksheet for Text 1: *I Stand Here Ironing*

Before reader response: This is a story of what life is for children and adults at a time after the war. *Emily was unfortunate compared to the other children.*

After reader response: Emily’s mother had a hard life and that is why Emily too had hard life. *Emily is a poor thing.*

The ‘before reader response activity’ written response shows mainly an efferent stance. The first sentence “This is a story of what life is for.....” shows a mainly efferent stance with a retelling of the story events. The second sentence “Emily was unfortunate...” shows a shift towards an aesthetic stance on the continuum. The response focused on the text character of Emily, making an evaluation of her [Emily’s] plight and comparing her to other children. This part of the ‘before reader response’ written response can be said to be along the continuum, displaying first an efferent and then towards a more aesthetic stance.

The ‘after reader response activity’ shows an initial efferent stance “Emily’s mother had a hard life...” in reporting facts of the story. However, the written response shifts to a more aesthetic stance when a personal comment on Emily was made “*Emily is a poor thing*”, which shows a degree of emotional involvement with the text character. Both the written responses (before and after reader response activities) show a combination of the two stances along the continuum, but the ‘after reader response’ written response shows a somewhat deeper aesthetic stance than the ‘before reader response’ written response. The ‘after reader response’ written response shows an emotional attachment to Emily which brought the response to a higher degree of the aesthetic experience.

By the time the students worked on the second short story, the stances taken were mainly aesthetic but the presence of the efferent stance was also noticed. Another student’s written response is shown for the second short story. The second short story is entitled *The Story of An Hour*. In order to provide a context of the sample, an explanation of the plot is given. Mrs Mallard was an oppressed wife in the sense that she stayed at home and did all the household chores while her husband went to work at the coal mine. They had no children. One day she got news of her husband’s death as a result of an accident. At first she sobbed uncontrollably and then she locked herself up in the room upstairs. There, she experienced a sense of freedom and joy in being able to live the rest of her life without him. She finally came out and was shocked to see Mr Mallard standing

at the door – it was a mistaken identity of the dead person involved in the accident. Mrs Mallard collapsed, in what seemed to be a sense of shock and joy-at seeing her husband alive. That was the general interpretation of her death. Mrs Mallard was also said to have had a physical condition of a weak heart, which helped to confirm initial thoughts of her sudden death.

Excerpt from Sample Worksheet for Text 2: *The Story of An Hour*

Before reader response: This is a story about a lady- Mrs Mallard, who died of shock because she see her husband alive after she is told that he died in an accident. She is so happy but also shock to see him standing at the door. She fainted and died of a heart attack.

After reader response: Mrs Mallard was sad but afterward happy, feeling free when she heard her husband died in accident. Then, wrong message, she sees husband standing at the door and *she feels so, so guilty, that she was happy for her freedom, now all gone, he is back. She collapses and dies, nothing to do with she got weak heart. I feel so sad for her. I also feel if her husband dies, maybe she can live free and happy. I think he controls her too much but she keeps quiet so long.*

In the above worksheet, the ‘before reader response’ written response is mainly in the efferent stance, where the student has basically narrated the story ‘This is a story about a lady, Mrs Mallard, who died...’

In the ‘after reader response’ written response, the student has clearly shifted to an aesthetic stance as she expressed her personal and individual transaction with the text, “I feel so sad for her. I also feel if her husband dies, maybe she can live free and happy”. The response shows a ‘lived-through’ experience of Mrs Mallard’s life with her husband and how his ‘death’ had given her (Mrs Mallard) a chance to really live once again- freely. However, this ‘freedom’ is short lived as the husband stood at the door. The response is a ‘lived through experience’ and it explains the guilt that Mrs Mallard went through – the guilt that caused her ultimate death, nothing else. This response is clearly at Level 5 of the Continuum (Appendix B).

What needs to be mentioned here is that stances are on a continuum which is non linear. The to and fro movements show shifts in thoughts. It is not suggested that one stance is superior to another. Both stances are required in reading and responding to literature texts. However, the question is if students stay on the

efferent stance, they will never experience the deeper and fuller meanings evoked by the text in a personal and meaningful way.

The class and group discussion transcripts revealed very interesting discussion and ideas that were exploratory in nature, and the researcher herself would never have thought about. For example, in *The Story of An Hour*, the worksheet response of the student quoted was a rare response, out of the box, and was valued by the teacher and later, the other students.

The class discussions were very active and the instructor-researcher's notes state that "I had to direct the students to speak as they were all trying to speak at the same time". It was also noted that sometimes when a student expressed a view point, the next person given the chance to talk did not connect to that point but wanted to express his/her group's opinion, even if it had nothing to do with what was stated just before. There was a lack of continuity and cohesion whilst rushing to say what the group thought. The instructor would sometimes ask for a class response to what was said before going on. Connectivity took second place while students rushed to express their ideas, which took precedence.

The researcher's field notes were particularly useful to show her observations and feelings of lost authority that was once held by her. The researcher mentioned that in Weeks 3 and 4, there was chaos in the class. Students were no longer seated in an orderly manner. It was 'such a mess'. Moving between groups was very difficult due to space constraints. The noise levels were high and often the researcher was concerned about how other classes and instructors would react. This seemed a pressing preoccupation of the researcher who was always looking out for someone who might drop by the class and ask for reduced volume. The researcher felt a certain amount of anxiety during these times. She wrote that "groups are managing their discussions pretty well. I don't see any purpose of me being here. I am feeling that I am not needed. The students held interpretive authority and did not even need to refer to me for anything. If anything, they were just checking on my instructions, nothing about the text.' Some students are more active than others". This data shows that despite what research has said about teacher control and the need to empower students, it is by no means an easy task to relinquish teacher control of the classroom.

Implications, Recommendations and Conclusion

The responses of the participants took on an efferent stance at first reading, suggesting that this was the result of 'conditioning' from school days when students were probably taught to answer Wh-questions to give a brief summary of the story. They were then prepared for examinations and in the process, memorized parts of the text for examination purposes. Perhaps if Literature has

to be tested, it could be done without a set interpretation, and credit should be given for well argued, original interpretations which made sense to the individual readers. Valuing students' interpretations was important. Perhaps teachers' awareness of the stances within Rosenblatt's transactional theory would be useful. In this way, teachers could direct their own teaching towards the aesthetic stance, right from the early years of students' lives, and encourage such responses from students. Presently, as found by Rosenblatt, nearly a century ago most teaching still takes on an efferent stance and this changes the course of students' natural aesthetic stance (as discovered by Cox & Many, 1992).

Reader response classrooms will have to be noisy and disorderly, unlike the usual classroom style. More learning takes place within the reader response classroom compared to the efferent teaching of traditional classrooms with set or 'right' interpretations. A quiet classroom does not equal more learning. With reader response, the cultivation of a more aesthetic stance will enable students to find Literature engaging and not just for the purpose of passing examinations with good grades. Students will also be better prepared for life in their quest of solutions to problems, becoming independent, and coping in their everyday lives. Noise in classroom should be tolerated and not just for Literature but for all subjects. Perhaps classrooms will have to be 'noise proof' to facilitate this new environment. It is through interaction and transaction that responses get more and more refined and require sharing of ideas among students. This will not be possible in a quiet environment. Student-centred classrooms will be noisy but within this noise are possible learning outcomes that could outweigh the teacher-centred quiet classrooms.

Finally, the role of teachers and instructors must change. Where once authority was held by them, now they must be willing to relinquish this to the students and act as facilitators. Where necessary, they can ask open-ended questions that will get students to think and in that way guide students within their facilitative role and not as the 'knower' of all knowledge and all correct interpretations. The interactive and transactive roles students play better equip them with knowledge compared to the teacher giving her students limited knowledge and opinions of critics which make no sense to the world of the students. Teachers and instructors may feel reluctant and threatened at this but students are capable of great work if only they are empowered and the only people who can help empower them are the teachers and instructors.

What can be said of the implications of the study is that reader response is the link to the question of stance. In order for students to express their responses which are not tied to 'right' answers, they need the opportunities to discuss their multiple interpretations in groups. With proper training, teachers will understand

reader response better, and the Ministry of Education needs to reconsider what they hope to achieve from education policies in terms of examination outcomes, and how best to develop individual minds with responses that are creative, engaged and cover the spectrum on the efferent/aesthetic continuum.

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APPENDIX A
Response Chart 1

Before Reader Response	After Reader Response
Text : I Stand Here Ironing	Text : I Stand Here Ironing
Please write your impressions/ interpretation of the short story you read.	Please write your impressions/interpretation of the short story you read

APPENDIX B
**Stance Classification: Towards a Literary Work
on an Efferent to Aesthetic Continuum**

1	2	3	4	5
Analysis of elements according to outside structure (what was learned, literary elements, analysis)	Retelling (concentration on relating the storyline, narrating what the story was about	Portions of both efferent analysis & aesthetic experience of work (primary focus using a single)	Selection of story events or characters to elaborate preference, judgement, or description (I enjoyed it when... I thought it was good/funny/unfair when...)	Focus on the lived through experience of the literary work (the world created while reading and the emotions associations resulting from the experience)