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Reader-Response Theory and Literature Discussions: a Springboard for Exploring Literary Texts

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Abstract

Reader-response theory is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in the mutual relationship between the reader and the text. According to this theory, the meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text within a particular context. Readers assume multiple roles when responding to a variety of forms of literature. The process of developing responses facilitates active and meaningful reading and increases emotional and intellectual participation in the text, which ultimately provides learners with better comprehension and awareness of the text. The potential value of classroom discussions helps learners to express their emotional reactions, to elicit their responses, to nourish their perspectives for furthering depth of their interpretation, to corroborate their opinions and share their responses for building a social relationship. It is crucial that learners are directed to perform more adequately in response to texts and actively engage in dialogues to pose literal and inferential questions, to explore a range of possible meanings and to foster cognitive development and comprehension.

Keywords: *reader-response theory, literature discussions, speaking skills, text, reader, interpretation*

1. Introduction

Six predominant approaches to literary analysis involve: new criticism, stylistic, critical literacy, language-based, structuralism, and reader-response. New criticism

disregards external elements in the analysis of a literary work and encumbers the reader with discovering the meaning embedded solely within the literary text by exercising total objectivity (Thomson, 1992). The stylistic approach clarifies that the rationale for teaching literature is to stress the aesthetic value of literature, thus developing learners' sensitivity to literary works, which includes unconventional use of structure, particularly poetry. The exploration of language and form in the stylistic approach provides access to meaning. Critical literacy, although not explicitly aiming to teach literature, draws on the neglectfulness of social aspects of language in the language classroom, hence attempts to unveil the reciprocation between social power and language use (Pennycook, 2001). The language-based approach raises learners' awareness of the language in literary texts, and makes literature accessible to language learners by facilitating their responses as well as their experiences with literature (Littlewood, 1986). In structuralism, readers' personal responses are ignored in analysis of literature and total objectivity comes up again in scrutiny of literary texts like new criticism. Structuralism, rather than the aesthetic value of literature, brings structure into focus, which is involved in meaning construction (Culler, 1982). The reader-response approach, which argues that in the act of reading it is indubitably the role of the reader to make inferences in their interpretation of literature (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988), has dominated literary research in the recent times (Beach & Hynds, 1996). This paper will deal with common aspects of the reader response theory and the encouraging role it plays in literature discussions for the learners to create meaning and verbalize thoughts.

2. Reader Response Theory and Literature Discussions

It has been admirably pointed out by Rosenblatt (1995) that reading literature is an exploration, in which readers avail themselves of emotions and histories with the intention of meaning construction. For her, meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text and throughout the transaction; learners bridge the gaps in the text employing their previous knowledge and disposition (Iser, 1972a) as well as their interpretation of the text (Fish, 1980). Originating from the work of Rosenblatt, the transactional view of response is based on the belief that the reader is "not seen as a separate entity, acting upon the environment, nor the environment acting on the organism, but both parts acting as a total event" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 98). After all, the meanings or interpretations created by the reader "are a reflection of the reader as well as the text" (Kim, 2004, p.146). This dynamic reading process will enable the reader to evoke a response

to events and characters of a text involving his/her emotions and thoughts. It is worth noting that active reading, emotional and intellectual participation in the text, construction of meaning and elicitation of responses are major aspects of literature discussions (Mart, 2019).

A resurgence of interest in literature discussions engages learners in the progress of literature awareness and literacy achievement (Scharer, 1992; Kim, 2004). Of late, there has been a movement toward transmitting approaches to reading into classroom practice. Rosenblatt (1985) grants literature a very important place and says that "of all the arts, literature is most immediately implicated with life itself" (p.65), then the literature classroom not only fosters the learning of literary works but also nurtures literate thinking. Discussions in literature classes advance moral reasoning, cultivate human sensitivity, boost intelligent reasoning, and escalate the comprehension of the topic being discussed. Literature is "a reservoir of conceptions of human possibilities" (Probst, 1994, p. 39). That being the case, classroom discussions of literature build a good environment to elicit learner responses and to nourish perspectives of learners to further their depth of interpretation. Discussions of literature have been marked by the development of appreciation for the perspectives created by learners, accommodation of diversified views and seeking encouraging ways to communicate (Knoeller, 1998). The teaching of literature marked a turning point through embarking on a journey of constructing meaning from text by restoring the aesthetic value of literature after Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*, which was to appear in 1938.

Literature discussions are essential grounding for improvement of language awareness if they are "directed toward enabling the student to perform more and fully and more adequately in response to texts" (Rosenblatt, 1974, p. 353). The process of developing responses facilitates active and meaningful reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). In relation to this point, response to the stimulus of the text increases emotional and intellectual participation in the text (Kim, 2004) and ultimately develops better comprehension and awareness of the text. It is crucial that learners are actively engaged in social interactions and dialogues with others for literacy development (Vygotsky, 1986).

It has been found that when learners move into literature discussions, they raise literal and inferential questions (Jewell & Pratt, 1999) to construct meaningful understandings; devote themselves to meaning making through exposure to more perspectives offered by texts (Lehman & Scharer, 1996); penetrate the text to foster comprehension and cognitive development (Farnan, 1986). The benefits of literature discussions in multiple learning settings are echoed in many research studies. Jewell and Pratt (1999) voice increased motivation for reading; Monson

(1986) depicts an in-depth portrait of a language classroom in which learners enhance emotional involvement; Dugan (1997) lays stress on the potential value of discussions for augmentation of appreciation towards literature. Significantly, the voices of Eeds and Wells (1989) about the role of literature discussions echo a powerful message to the learners to articulate their opinions, ideas and interpretations without any restrictions. Quality talk, which is of great value in language development, grows out of literature discussions by struggling of desire for negotiation of meanings (Kim, 2004).

3. The Construction of Meaning in Reader Response Theory

The reader response approach is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in a mutual relationship between the reader and the text when the reader demystifies literature and links it to his/her individual experience. Emotional reactions that grow out of this reciprocal bond can consolidate classroom instruction (Bleich, 1975). Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional view affirms that readers are experience builders and the text is an activating stimulus and serves as a guide, a regulator, a blueprint, and an avenue for interpretation. Put another way, the text activates the reader's early experiences concerning his/her experiences with literature and with his/her life; guides for the selection, rejection and order of what comes forth; and regulates what should be brought to the reader's attention.

Beach (1993) offered different perspectives to describe the act of reading; first the reader engages in a textual response of a text which holds the correct and universal meaning yet not covered by the reader. Second, the reader has been acculturated into reading, into dealing with creation of meaning, and into unveiling the meaning in the text. Finally, the reader's responses are influenced by the context. Put very baldly, engaging readers in the construction of meaning ensures readers and the contexts surrounding them to become as important as the texts to the literary transaction. The premise behind this theoretical perspective is to acculturate the reader into reading the text with a critical eye for proper interpretation or common judgment.

In reader response theory, the reader creates meaning form the text from either an aesthetic or efferent stance (Schieble, 2010). Aesthetic responses offer readers a continuum for attending to the experience of reading. The readers are expected to explore a range of possible meanings (Purves, 1993).

The term aesthetic was chosen because its Greek source suggested perception through the senses, feelings, and intuitions…The aesthetic reader pays attention

to—savors—the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth and participates in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the images, ideas and scenes and they unfold (p. 11).

On the other hand, efferent responses offer readers a continuum for creation of meaning. The readers are expected to provide a clear answer about the meaning of the text. While aesthetic stance is concerned with what readers have experienced, efferent stance is concerned with what readers draw upon in the act of reading.

The term efferent …designates the kind of reading in which attention is centred predominantly on what is to be extracted and retained after the reading event… Meaning results from abstracting out and analytically structuring the ideas, information, directions, or conclusions to be retained, used, or acted on after the reading event (p. 11).

For Rosenblatt (1977), in aesthetic reading learners attend to the quality of the experience they are exposed to under the surveillance of the text; conversely, in efferent reading learners attend to information and directions that reside in practical situations. The distinction between aesthetic or efferent readings springs from "what the reader does, the stance that he adopts and the activities he carries out in relation to the text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 27).

In the process of meaning construction, learners promote thinking skills, experience other cultures, speculate on the notions and develop their understanding of them, elevate interpretive skills and refine their creative abilities in writing (Oster, 1989). However, teachers and curriculum have a strong influence on response. Teachers have a profound effect upon assisting or hampering reader response in discussions of literature. Instructional approaches employed by teachers and selection of literature impinge upon the quality of learner response. Hickman (1981) purported that several elements controlled by the teacher in classroom settings have a bearing upon learner responses:

a) Accentuating the calibre and relatedness of titles for classroom use
b) Selecting literature-based materials on the level of learners to assure that they enter the text
c) Giving a gist of literary texts to recapitulate the tension of discussions and activities
d) Providing suggestions, encouraging high aspirations, asserting the value of literature, acknowledging flexibility in time and space, and catering for materials to reconcile learners and literature study
e) Invigorating learning by allowing learners to contemplate literary texts in depth and become makers of meaning.

Hickman (1981) clearly outlined the influence of teachers on "the expression of response through the ability to manipulate the classroom context" (p.353). Probst (1994), in pursuit of meaning creation, offers six principles which not only cultivate in learners a love of reading but also a competence to harness literary competence to enrich their lives. First, meaning construction requires participation of learners which lies in inviting them to response to texts. Second, learners need an opportunity to verbalize their responses, thereby they need time to shape their responses. Third, in the interest of articulating their responses, learners demonstrate similar and different points of view and the value of this process lies in finding links among their responses. Fourth, in response to a text, it is useful to invite learners to write about a text based on the notion that it gives learners footing to build possibilities of discovery of meaning. Fifth, in the interest of conducting well-designed literature discussions allows them to feel free to speculate on ideas. Finally, learners need to encounter other texts, other discussions and other experiences as well to explore the bonds. As Rosenblatt (1960) indicates, transactional theory can be applied to all levels of language classes on the grounds that literature is a vehicle for communication by virtue of transaction. Enabling learners to experience a literary text in lieu of analyzing it flourishes literature to turn out to be "a mode of personal life experience that involves a potentially powerful combination of intellect and emotions not available in other areas of study" (Connell, 2000, p. 27). These arguments show that the literature-based approach advances written and verbal language skills and perfects communicative competence.

The proponents of the communicative approach to language teaching have reached a consensus about the use of authentic materials to be an important initiative to develop communicative skills of language learners. Based on the claim that traditional grammar instruction is fragmented and artificial to negotiate meaning, the use of literature confirms positive results in communication progress as a consequence of the interaction with authentic materials. Literature is a useful resource to cultivate communication repertoires of language learners. Widdowson (1975) argues that the role of literature "is not to provide information about particular pieces of literature in the syllabus but to get the learners to recognize how these particular pieces exemplify more general principles of communication (p. 84). Presentation of literature to learners can develop their sensitivity to how language is used to communicate. Adaptation of literature not only expands communicative abilities but also empowers creative abilities. Empowerment of creativity is the basis for meaning-making through engagement with literary texts that results in meaningful communication situations.

Literary texts elude one single interpretation; in fact they are open to multiple interpretations which provide opinion gaps between interpretations made by learners. Gilroy (1995) argues that these opinion gaps between interpretations can be bridged with the aid of genuine interaction. Engagement in active discussions leads learners to identification and comprehension of language operations as well as induces them to practice the language in meaningful interaction for multiple communicative purposes.

4. Conclusion

Reader-response theory is based on an effort to illuminate the relationship between the reader and the text. The underlying idea is that "literary texts frequently contain social dilemmas and conflicts. Such reading demands personal responses from readers" (Yang, 2002, p. 50). In order for readers to make sense of these literary texts, the theory tends to focus on a range of different roles readers should adopt when they are engaged in the process of reading. Reader response theory is grounded upon the assumption that in a reading experience readers act a part as much as the text to make an interpretation.

Reader response theory rejects new criticism, which is based on the idea that meaning is solely generated by the text, and can only be discovered by improved analytic skills. By privileging them as experience builders in attempting to construct meaning, reader response theory considers readers as active agents who deal with the creation of meaning. As part of their engagement with texts, readers endeavor to arrive at an interpretation through drawing on their background knowledge and experiences. In this process, readers assume a highly active role in meaning construction. In focusing on the mutual relationship between the text and the reader, reader response theory posits that meaning can be negotiated only after the convergence between the reader and the text. In other words, a literary text is brought into existence by means of a transactional process, in which a reciprocal bond between the text and the reader is created because "the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or the realization of the text but in fact must lie halfway between the two" (Iser, 1972b, p. 269). Tyson (2006) outlines the features of reader response theory:

(1) the role of the reader cannot be omitted from our understanding of literature and (2) readers do not passively consume the meaning presented to them by an objective literary text; rather they actively make the meaning they find in literature (p. 170).

Reading rests on a continuum from aesthetic to efferent in reader response theory. While the aesthetic stance refers to feelings and thoughts of the readers, the efferent stance turns the attention towards the information the readers draw upon at the end of the reading.

Language learning involves "the creation and communication of meaning" (Rigg, 1991, p. 523). Within this context, literature discussions create an ethos for learners not only to respond to texts and create meaning but also to verbalize their interpretations.

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