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## **READER-RESPONSE THEORY AND APPROACH: APPLICATION, VALUES AND SIGNIFICANCE FOR STUDENTS IN LITERATURE COURSES**

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DOI: 10.2478/seeur-2019-0003

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the implementation of the reader-response theory and approach in the context of a literature course (English Literature 1) taught to students enrolled at the Department of English Language and Literature, who are preparing to be future teachers of English language. This article aims to examine the benefits and values of the reader-response theory applied in the described context, as well as potential drawbacks. The basic postulates of the reader-response theory and reader-response approach in class emphasize the crucial role of the reader on the literary and aesthetic experience when reading a literary text. The reader's way of understanding and perceptions of a literary text, as well as the experience of the reader, influence the interaction between

the reader and a text. This interaction contributes to the development of interpretation of the text and reconstruction of the ideas expressed in the text. The article examines the possible ways of implementing the reader-response theory in a literature class, including written assignments, personal responses to a literary text and in-class discussions. The research focuses on qualitative data collection and on analyzing students' responses to these activities. Furthermore, the research aims to provide a clearer picture of students' attitudes, observations and personal reactions when interacting with a literary text. One of the aims of the article is to provide recommendations and suggestions regarding reader-response theory application in teaching literature courses at tertiary level, in addition to designing course curricula and selecting appropriate in-class activities.

**Key Words:** *reader-response, theory, literature, text, readers, activities.*

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the implementation of reader-response approach in the context of Literature classes designed for students at the Department of English Language and Literature. The article will attempt to describe the essential characteristics of the reader-response theory and reader-response approach application in the context of teaching literature. In addition, the article aims to discuss the potential benefits and drawbacks of including reader-response theory postulates in teaching practices and activities, after analyzing students' responses when reading literary texts from the perspectives of reader response and

the developmental model of reader response described by Thomson (1987) described in more detail in the following chapters. The conclusions and the recommendations of the article attempt to provide theoretical framework guidelines on implementation of the reader-response approach in teaching literature.

### **Characteristics of reader-response approach**

In order to describe the benefits of implementation of reader-response theory in literature courses, it is important to elaborate on the basic postulates and the characteristics of reader response theory.

Carlisle (2000) describes the reader-response theory as a theory which, according to him: “emphasizes the creative role of the reader” (p.12). Carlisle (2000) emphasizes the importance of the active and communicative nature of reader-response theory, which fits the purpose and the teaching practices in contemporary trends of ELT (English Language Teaching). What are the basic assumptions of reader-response theory? Rosenblatt’s theory (1978) of reader-response defines the interaction of the reader with literary texts as a variable which influences and changes the texts and constricts meanings. Amer (2003, p.68) defines the theory as follows:

It views the reading process as a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader, with his past experiences, beliefs, expectations and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text, and meaning is determined as the result of this transaction. Thus, reading, in this

approach, is a reflective and creative process and meaning is self-contracted. (Amer, 2003, p.68)

Pike (2003, p.63) in Garzon and Pena (2015, p.188) defines reader-response approach in class room as follows: “The transaction is one where the shape of the gap or entrance in the text is determined by the shape of the reader who enters as well as the text being entered. Essentially, different readers cause the gap to adopt different shapes. Further, what is indeterminate for one reader may not be indeterminate for another.” This means that readers influence the literary texts, have the power to change them and interact with them. In other words, they have a similar role to the author, as explained by Justman (2010, p.112): “The reader co-authors the literary text.”

Garzon and Pena (2015, p.188), define this interaction between the text and the reader as follows:”Hence, in RRT, the construction of meaning in the personal literary experience is the main characteristic when thinking of the connection between the reader and the text.”

It can be concluded that the reader-response theory views the text and reader interaction as mutually dependent. The text is influenced by the reader’s understanding and perceptions. The reader has an active role in shaping the text. The text, as pointed out by Becker (1999, 104): ... presents a set of linguistic, conceptual and referential stimuli. The reader, aware of and part of the context, infuses meaning into the textual squiggles and early in the reader-event selects, either consciously or unconsciously, a predominant stance.” In other words, this theory does not see the text characteristics as something which is unaffected and independent of readers’ influence. When interacting with a text, the

readers are encouraged to critically evaluate and interpret the text on the basis of their personal experience, previous knowledge and opinion. However, As Woodruff and Griffin (2017) point out, the reader response approach has certain drawbacks: neglecting the author's intentions and meaning given to the text by the author, overly focusing on the perceptions of the reader, thus neglecting different perspectives. In addition, the perceptions of the reader can be too subjective, therefore imposing limitations on text interpretations.

### **Ways of implementing reader- response theory in introductory literature course and the characteristics of the developmental model**

The previous chapter of this article provided details regarding reader-response approach implementation, benefits and potential drawbacks. The aim of the application of the Reader-Response Theory is to elicit learners' personal response to literary texts, as well their reactions when dealing with literary texts. In addition, the aims include eliciting learners' opinions, attitudes and personal reactions to a certain text. Amer (2003) recommends explaining to the students, before applying the reader-response approach, that there are no correct or wrong answers or any kind of competition for the most appropriate interpretation of a text. A number of activities or techniques can be used in order to apply the Reader Response Approach in literature classrooms. Amer (2003, p.68) lists the following:

1. Reading logs

2. Response journal
3. Critical questioning and writing
4. Self-questioning
5. Role-play
6. Drama and letter-writing
7. Rewriting narratives from another character's point of view

All of the assignments listed above provide students with an opportunity to convey their personal responses to literary texts. The research described in this article includes critical questioning and written analysis.

The developmental model of a reader-response approach is presented by Thomson (1987), who describes several levels of response to a literary text. According to Harding (1962) in Thomson (1987), at the moment the readers pass the level of basic understanding of text, they take the role of an onlooker and three main processes are developing, as a result of the text-reader interaction:

1. Empathizing (with the experience of other people)
2. Evaluating characters
3. Accepting or rejecting the values of an author

Thomson (1987) proceeds to define the levels of the developmental models as follows:

Level 1: *Literal understanding*, which involves understanding the information presented in a given text (a story, for example). According to Thomson (1987), students read at the level of basic understanding without paying close attention to details or involving analysis. At this stage, as described by Thomson (1987), characters are seen mostly in

terms of stereotypes and only as good or bad. Readers read and form only simple mental images or anticipate further actions but only in very short terms.

Level 2: *Empathy*, which includes personalizing the text, relating the text with students' own lives and sympathy with some of the characters. Readers are interested in characters and the motivation of characters in more complex terms, analyzing not only actions but also consequences.

Level 3: *Analogy*, a stage during which readers learn about their own lives through making connections with characters and creating connections between their personal experience and fictional events described in literary texts.

Level 4: *Reflection*, a stage during which leads to deeper understanding of other people and their motives, during which the readers think about the events and the behaviors in a text, thus evaluating the characters and the theme of a story.

Level 5: *Evaluation* of fiction is the fifth stage which involves seeing the entire literary text as the construction of the author. At the same time, this stage involves the analysis of author's social and cultural values and comparison with students' values.

Level 6: *Recognition*, a stage during which the readers are aware of the textual functions of the reader and the author, considering the relationship between those functions, exploring their own identities as readers. In addition, the readers become aware of the reading process and their own self-understanding.

Thomson (1987, p. 153) sees the stages or levels of the developmental model as dynamic movement of reader's interest as movement from: "... emotional closeness to reflective distance", as well as movement to deeper understanding of social and ideological aspects of a text and development of the interpretative strategies of the reader.

The research described in the following chapter, is based on the analysis of students' responses to a literary text compared to the levels described by the developmental model.

### **The study questions, participants and students' reactions according to the developmental model to a particular literary text**

This research was conducted among a group of first year students of English Language, at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications, Department of English Language and Literature. The entire class consisted of 22 students. During the time this research was conducted, (winter semester 2017), the participants were 19-23 years old. All of them are non-native speakers of English. The language proficiency of the participants, at the time of the research, varied from level B1 (intermediate) to C1 (proficient user) according to Common European Framework of Reference.

The research questions explored in this study were related to students' participation and responses to the literary texts. The first research question was related to students' participation:

1. Are students' participation and responsiveness to literary texts increased when reader-response approach is implemented?

The second research question pertains to the level of students' responses to literary texts:

2. To which extent /level do students respond to literary texts when reader-response approach is implemented?

The research conducted analyses the qualitative data collected via analyzing students' responses in two different contexts and two different types of assignments. The assignments analyzed, implemented as a part of reader-response approach are the following:

1. Character analysis (1 of the characters in the novel is chosen and analyzed)
2. In class discussions (3 excerpts of the novel are discussed)

The assignments listed above were part of introducing and working on the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Student responses are collected via notes during in class discussions and analysis of their written / written assignments- character analysis.

Student responses from these assignments were analyzed in terms of the stages of the developmental model presented by Thomson (1987). The aim of the study and analysis of these activities was to provide a clearer picture of students' attitudes, observations and personal reactions when interacting with a literary text. Students' responses were analyzed in terms of the level reached according to the developmental model, which start from the most basic literal understanding of a text, through empathy, analogy and reflection/interpretation, to the highest level of personal response to the text, which includes evaluation and recognition. In total,

the responses of 8 students out of 22 in class were analyzed and evaluated. The following chapters of the novel were discussed in class: Chapter 1, Chapter 2 and Chapter 5. Some of the questions/prompts to initiate and facilitate the in class discussions were:

1. *How would you describe Daisy's behavior during dinner? How would you feel in a similar situation?*
2. *It is clear that despite knowing about his affair, Daisy does not plan to leave Tom. Why? What would you do in this situation?*
3. *What is the meaning of the green light? How do you interpret this symbol? Is it relevant, in your opinion?*
4. *Describe the Valley of Ashes. What is the symbolic meaning of the oculist advertisement?*
5. *Describe Gatsby's behavior before Daisy arrives for tea in Nick's house? How would you feel in a similar situation?*
6. *How do Daisy and Gatsby react when they see each other? How would you feel in this moment and in this situation?*
7. *Do you believe that Gatsby's hopes and expectations were met?*

According to the analysis and the notes of student responses of the in-class discussions, it can be concluded that 8 out of 8 recorded and analyzed student responses understood the text at level 1. This means that all of them understood the text at the level of literal understanding. The students' contributions to in class discussions showed that the students could follow the plot of the novel, understood the novel at the most basic level of text understanding and the events described.

From their responses, it can be concluded that the majority of them (7), understand the text on the level of empathy, analogy and interpretation. The students are able to link the text with their personal experience and opinion, to interpret the text from their standpoint of view and to rethink their own values through in class discussions. In addition, 2 out of 8 students respond to the text at the levels of evaluation and recognition. They are able to evaluate the text and the characters in the text,

comparing the values and the norms expressed in the text with their own. They are also aware of the reading process and their own reactions to the text, thus increasing self-understanding.

Students' responses which illustrate the findings stated previously, include the following:

*During the dinner in their home, Daisy appears to be very happy. However, this happiness seems to be a little exaggerated. She is pretending, I think, that she is happy. I can sense antagonism towards her husband, because she knows about his affair but she doesn't say anything. Nick can feel this tension between Daisy and her husband, because he wants to look at everyone and to avoid looking at them at the same time. He is shocked to learn about Tom's affair.*

The response presented above shows evidence of the level of literal understanding (event and the characters are correctly referred to: the dinner, during which Nick reunites with Daisy and meets Jordan and Tom), as well as the level of empathy and analogy (*I can sense antagonism; she is pretending to be happy*). The response shows certain level of reflection and interpretation, as well as level of evaluation of cultural and societal values.

*I believe that Daisy won't leave Tom because of the societal norms and conventions. She married him because it was expected of her to get married. She has a child and she has to think about her girl. I would do the same thing. I would always consider the effects that a divorce might have on my child.*

This response shows the level of literal understanding, empathy and analogy (*I would do the same thing*), level of evaluation of the text and evaluation of societal and cultural norms.

*Both Daisy and Gatsby are tensed and very nervous when they see each other. He accidentally breaks the clock on the mantelpiece and this shows that he is not relaxed. He is very clumsy and almost afraid of Daisy. She is also nervous, but not so much, at least in my opinion. I believe that she does not love Gatsby with the same intensity. She appears to be more restrained when they meet. For instance, she appears to be calm when she says that they haven't seen each other for many years. I believe that meeting a person I love after five years would be nerve-wrecking, to say the least.*

This response shows evidence of response at the level of literal understanding, empathy and analogy.

*I think that Gatsby's hopes and expectations were met when he saw Daisy after five years. In my opinion, he only wanted to see her again. He did not think of her as a married woman who has a child. He thinks of Daisy as a woman he loves, a woman who is free and who is there for*

*him. Those five years did not change anything for him. He is still in love with her; her marriage does not exist for him. I believe that this shows his dark side: he does not care about her previous life and her child; they do not exist for him. He is a negative character, I think.*

This response shows evidence of literal understanding, empathy and analogy, level of evaluation of the text, recognition.

The character analysis was a written assignment that the students had to submit two weeks after the in-class analysis and discussions were conducted. Their task was to choose one of the characters in the novel and to evaluate the character in terms of behavior, relationships with other characters in the novel, norms and the values that the character displays during these interactions and the overall evaluation of the character. Similarly to the first part of the research, the written assignments of the same students (8) were analyzed and compared to the levels of developmental model presented by Thomson (1987). From the analysis of the assignments, several conclusions can be drawn. The findings show that all of the participants (the students) understand the text at the level of literal understanding. From their assignments, it can be concluded that the majority of them (6 assignments in total), respond to the text at the level of empathy, analogy and interpretation. Excerpts from the character analysis assignments illustrate the previous findings.

*For the purpose of this assignment, I have chosen to analyze Daisy [...] I believe that she is very selfish and too comfortable being married to Tom, who can provide her with financial security and stability. Of course Gatsby is rich too, but she is not certain about his reputation or stability. She is also worried about the reactions from the society and people who know her. [...] I do not think that she is in love with Gatsby, although she appears to be, for instance, in the moment when he shows her his collection of shirts. She does not take responsibility for the accident. She does not show up for Gatsby's funeral. I dislike Daisy's character, especially towards the end of the novel. In my opinion, she is cruel and indeed reckless. Not showing up for Gatsby's funeral is a definite proof of the assumption that she does not love him.*

This response shows the level of literal understanding, empathy and analogy, as well as the level of interpretation and evaluation.

*Gatsby's character is very unusual. He dresses very carefully and pays attention to his looks [...] He is very cautious when it comes to his choice of words and phrases. He uses the phrase "old sport" in order to show that he grew up in a wealthy family where this way of speaking was ordinary. He tries to prove that he was an outstanding soldier and officer and an educated man. His actions have one aim only: he is trying to win Daisy back, to establish again their relationship and he hopes that he will impress her with his success and money. He is, in my opinion, very naïve and too optimistic, to think that he can erase the past and convince Daisy to forget about the previous five years and her marriage. It seems to me that he forgets about the society, the norms and the rules.*

Level of literal understanding can be evidenced in this response, as well as empathy and analogy, level of interpretation and evaluation.

Both the in-class discussions and the character analysis assignments response analysis showed that students are more interested in literary texts when the texts can be discussed via prompts/ discussion questions which facilitate personalization of the discussion. As a result, the in-class discussions were perceived to be more relevant to the students. The reader-response approach implemented via critical questioning and writing, required from the participants/ students, to provide answers based on their personal perceptions, opinions and point of view. Thus, the participation and interest was facilitated and reinforced. Both groups of responses (discussions and character analysis) showed that the students understood the texts on the majority of the levels, starting from the level of literal understanding. In addition, the majority of the students/ participants respond to the text at the level of empathy, analogy and interpretation.

## **Recommendations and benefits of reader response implementation in literature courses**

Taking into consideration the importance of students' response and involvement in the discussion of a literary text, it is evident that it is crucial to facilitate the responses and students' involvement. From the study and the participants' reactions, several conclusions can be drawn. One of the conclusions is that the implementation of the reader-response approach in a literature classroom may be beneficial, promote students' participation and their responsiveness towards literary texts. Another benefit is increasing students' awareness that literary texts are relevant and relate to students' lives, beliefs and values.

Probst (1994) discusses the benefits of implementation of reader response approach in the Literature/Writing program. Among the goals of the program listed, the following can be emphasized:

1. Students will learn about themselves, via reflecting upon their behavior and their experiences.
2. Students will learn about others, developing their empathy and understanding.
3. Students will learn about cultures and societies, their varying concepts and issues of human experience.
4. Students will learn how texts shape our thoughts or our emotions, how these texts encourage an individual to see things in certain ways.

Tucker (2000), when discussing the benefits of RRT implemented in a similar context to the one described in this article, discusses the value of

reader-response theory in introductory literature course. According to Tucker, (2000, p.199) the benefits are the following:

1. It enables the students to experience relevance in the learning task.
2. Involves them in active, not passive, encounter with the literature.
3. Validates them as critical readers who are capable of determining meaning in texts.
4. Provides them with the opportunity to express themselves freely.

Among the benefits of implementing reader-response theory in literature classes is the one stated by Buckler in Tucker ( 2000, p.200) : “...the most valuable pedagogical application in of reader-response criticism creates a link between real-life experience and work –helping the student to connect-and then builds on that connection.”

In order to facilitate the implementation of the reader response approach in a classroom, the teacher’s role should be focused on directing the discussion, enabling students to provide their responses and building the interpretation on group understanding of the text, as well as individual students’ responses.

It can be concluded that the benefits from the reader-response approach implemented in literature courses are numerous. Among them, we can include fostering students’ involvement with the literary text, raising students’ awareness of the importance of critical reading, creating context in which the text is more relevant and meaningful to the reader and increasing students’ participation when encountering literary texts.

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