
Title	The reader response approach to the teaching of literature
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Source	<i>REACT</i> , 1997(1), 29-34
Published by	National Institute of Education (Singapore)

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THE READER RESPONSE APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

Review by Chua Seok Hong

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Reader Response Approach has been actively promoted as the most appropriate method for the teaching of literature in Western elementary (primary) and secondary classrooms. Usually, teachers and researchers refer to Louise Rosenblatt and her book, *Literature as Exploration* (1938), as the source for this approach. It appeals to teachers who feel that literature is a fount of unique aesthetic experiences for each pupil. The popularity of the Reader Response Approach can be seen in the number of publications which use this term. The ERIC lists 1776 articles on this topic from 1980 to now, compared to 64 articles with this term for 1966 to 1979. This article outlines the main ideas of this approach, its development as an accepted method for literature teaching, and evaluates its usefulness for teachers.

THE READER RESPONSE APPROACH

Based on Rosenblatt's work (1938, 1985, 1990), the main ideas of Reader Response are:

- * "*The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader and a particular text at a particular time under particular circumstances.*" (1985 p.40)

- * The *transaction* with the literary text is an *aesthetic reading*. In aesthetic reading, the reader engages with ideas in the text and draws from her own prior experiences. From these she creates a new experience which Rosenblatt considers is a *poem*, an *event*, and an *evocation*. According to her, the transactional process involves the text and reader together, whereas *interactive* reading suggests a relation between two separate and distinct entities, as is seen in these different definitions of reading she proposes:

READING AS TRANSACTION

reader and text (leads to.....

“poem”/event (i.e. the evocation)

READING AS INTERACTION

reader (one separate entity)

text (one separate entity)

- * Aesthetic reading, i.e. the transaction with the literary work, has both a private and public focus, and is different from what she terms *efferent reading*, which is purpose oriented.
- * This aesthetic reading with the text is a process in which the reader selects ideas and synthesizes them into a new experience - the evocation - which is created by the reader and the play, story, novel or poem.

Background to the Reader Response Approach

It is useful to bear in mind that Rosenblatt developed her ideas about Reader Response and transactional reading as a reaction against I. A. Richards' ideas for the reading of poetry. Before Richards published his book, *Practical Criticism* (1928), literature appreciation and commentary were based on two approaches:

- a. the *moral-philosophical* – a literary work is worthy because it is moving and morally uplifting and leads us to understand our inner emotions.
- b. the *historical-biographical* – the work was written by a very important person – in our present day, for example, the study of Mao Tze Tung's poetry in China and Sukarno's speeches in Indonesian classrooms when these leaders were in power.

Another line of research and theorizing was *philology* where language and literature were studied together in terms of historical development.

After Richards' book, *practical criticism* (or *close reading*) became the standard practice of literature analysis and evaluation and was called *New Criticism*. It was seen as a more objective way of analyzing poetry. It had a technical vocabulary with terms such as *ambiguity*, *irony* and *texture* which were found to be useful for interpreting and judging whether a poem was good or inadequate. In most

literature classes, some kind of practical criticism is compulsory. Gradually some people began to criticize this practice which they considered a dry and painful exercise which destroyed the beauty of the literary work. Rosenblatt herself said that she wrote *Literature as Exploration* as a reaction against some of the assumptions of practical criticism. One such assumption is that "*the New Critics treated the poem as an autonomous entity that could be objectively analyzed*" (1990, p.102). She wanted to emphasize the transaction of reader and text to show that both depended on each other for meaning and that there can be more than one meaning or interpretation.

It could be said that popularization of the Reader Response Approach is a result of a revaluation and reclaiming of sorts. In the 1970s and 1980s there was much interest among Trans-Atlantic literature academics in European theories about the exact nature of literature reading. These theories, found in collections of papers on criticism, focused on the role of the reader – the implied reader, the super reader, etc. (e.g. Tompkins, 1980). They tried to answer questions about the role of the reader and the process of literary reading. Rosenblatt's earlier writing, which emphasized the individual reader's response, seemed to fit into these discussions. Her ideas became the accepted approach for literature teaching. Theorizing at the tertiary level has moved on to post-structuralism, deconstruction, and cultural materialism, but the Reader Response Approach is now entrenched,

through active promotion by teaching experts, as the most appropriate pedagogy for school literature.

The Reader Response Approach stresses the value of individual and unique encounters with text ... it frees the reader from stereotyped, conventional responses.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Studies using the Reader Response Approach have yielded some encouraging results. A recent research project on Second Grade (Primary Two) American pupils found that pupils responded aesthetically to folk and fairy tales and, that with sufficient teacher modelling and support, pupils were able to articulate and demonstrate their understanding of written texts (McCormack, 1993). Shelton (1994) reported that, at the high school (secondary) level, the Reader Response Approach was based largely on the types of questions teachers asked in class. It also seemed to depend on their personality. When the Reader Response Approach was not used, it was because the teacher wanted greater control of the classroom.

Two local studies have investigated the effectiveness of the Reader Response Approach in the Singapore classroom. In Bella Ho's study (1988) the traditional approach was compared with the Reader Response Approach to establish which was more effective. The traditional approach

referred to the method of oral questioning on the meaning of poems set for the Secondary One class. With the Reader Response Approach, pupils were invited to express their impressions and feelings for the poems. In the post-test, pupils who were taught with the Reader Response Approach did slightly better than those who were taught the traditional way. Another study, conducted by Susan Leong (1992) compared the effectiveness of teaching the novel using the traditional method and the Reader Response Approach. She also found that this approach was more effective with her Secondary Two pupils.

CONCLUSION

What we need then is a balance of two imperatives. One is the need to draw out from our pupils their own responses to the literary texts. When done competently, response enables mutual understanding of text and reader. The other impetus is the need to bring across to our students, through interesting and focused strategies, the ways by which literary knowledge and skills come together to help pupils achieve success in reading and writing in this subject.

More recent developments such as the language-based approach, reflective reading, and genre-based reading and writing may contribute to the refinement or modification of Reader Response. But its main idea that aesthetic reading is an individual 'poetic' transaction between reader and text is still of great appeal to the literature teacher.



IMPLICATIONS

Within the context of a reaction against the rigidity of practical criticism, The Reader Response Approach has the following implications for teachers of literature:

- 1. *Students should be encouraged to express themselves freely*** about a selection of literature texts in class discussions and in their own writing. However, teachers must also help them to clarify their response to the text and guard against total relativism or subjectivity.
- 2. *The teacher has to balance the technical analysis of poetry by also bringing out and relating the aesthetic and emotive aspects of the work of literature to the pupil reader.*** Literature has aesthetic and social elements, substance and form. Emphasis on only the form and literary effects diminishes the work of art.
- 3. *Teachers should encourage their students to reach into their own experiences for understanding,*** and help them to appreciate the literature text they are reading. They should aim to foster inquiry and an attitude of tentativeness (exploration).

Possible Problems with Using The Reader Response Approach

Reader Response stresses the value of individual and unique encounters with the text. This is a liberation of the reader from the tyranny of one expert and an 'accurate' interpretation of a work of literature. It frees the reader from stereotyped, conventional responses. This is because when you read a poem, you will draw on your own impressions and responses to the text. You will question these impressions and responses and reread and develop what is, for you, an appropriate interpretation of the poem. However, it is not difficult to see the many problems this approach has.

One problem is confusion about what constitutes a response. Pupils have their own ideas about this, for example – "*there is no right or wrong... it is my own idea about the text, so you should accept it*", and "*I must say something original about the text because I can't say what other people have said*". Teachers may have encountered students who think that responding is relating their own personal experiences. These may be personally interesting but may not bring about understanding of the literary text. Pupils can make inappropriate responses which may seem valid and interesting and increase the pupil's popularity in class, but may be wholly unacceptable: "*A Tale of Two Cities is as interesting as watching paint dry*", and "*A Midsummer's Night's Dream sucks*", for example.

By stressing the particular reader, text, time, and context for each evocation, it could be said that Reader Response creates many problems for the teacher of forty or so individuals with their own particular responses. Are forty or so distinct responses possible or desirable? There is a conflict between the idea of the naive reader, as Rosenblatt's reader appears to be, and the type of reader the school has to help produce. How does one reconcile individual response with examination requirements?

As opposed to the naive reader, Purves (1993) suggests that we try to develop a knowledgeable and articulate reader who has learnt the cultural and intellectual ideas and habits of her community. Instead of being an original reader with unique responses, the pupil can be seen as one who has learned the ways of knowing her subject domain. One of these ways is through individual responses, but these responses have to be guided and constrained by the codes and conventions of the subject which the teacher and pupils have to make use of.

Finally, as with Practical Criticism, Reader Response appears to be more applicable to the reading of poetry. In the reading of narratives, structural aspects of the text are more analytical and less open to personal response.

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