

The Responses of Native and Non-Native Speakers of English to English Short Stories

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Abstract:

With a reader response theory as its backdrop, this paper compares the responses of both EFL students and native speaker teachers to short stories written in English. The results show that the responses of both groups differ more in terms of quantity rather than quality with both groups scoring the highest in interpretational responses. The paper argues that teachers should involve the learners' background knowledge and feelings in order to engage them in literature classes and not place excessive emphasis on received interpretations. Aesthetic responses are as important as efferent ones and should be used in the EFL literature classroom.

Key words: reader response, aesthetic response, efferent response, types of responses, native speakers, non-native speakers

“The process of understanding a work implies a recreation of it, an attempt to grasp completely all sensations and concepts through which the author seeks to convey the qualities of his sense of life. Each of us must make a new synthesis of these elements with his own nature, but it is essential that he assimilate those elements of experience which the author has actually presented (Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 1995, p. 133).

Introduction

The emergence of reader response theories in the field of literature teaching has shifted the exclusive emphasis on the text, while acknowledging its importance, to an emphasis on the reader. It was Louise Rosenblatt who began the march to a transactional theory of reader response, which emphasizes a mutual interaction between the reader and the text in the process of creating and recreating meaning. Texts do not come into existence alone nor do they acquire their meaning or invoke feelings unless they are read by a reader. Without a reader, texts are no more than marks on a page (Karolides, 2000).

The reader brings to the text a host of experiences, characteristics, qualities, emotions and ideas that interact with the message embedded in the text and conveyed through the medium of words to produce or create the meaning of the message. Because each reader brings different individual experiences, the reshaped text's meaning or each reader's response to it is unique and cannot be duplicated. As Rosenblatt, in *Literature as Exploration*, (1995) puts it, "The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of the past events, present needs and preoccupations, and a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. These and many other elements in a never-to be-duplicated combination enter into the reader's relationship with the text" (P. 31).

Thus, to Rosenblatt, there is no generic reader or literary work or a generic, right response to that work. Hence, aesthetic rather than efferent responses are what Rosenblatt calls for in her work (Rosenblatt, 1995, 1994). An aesthetic stance acknowledges the validity of the emotions and associations a reader might have during and after reading a piece of literature. By contrast, an efferent stance encourages the reader to look for the message embedded in the text. To people who hold such a view, there is one correct interpretation of the text that has nothing to do with affective aspects in the readers' personality; nor does it give any recognition to the reader's past memories or experiences.

Many researchers and practitioners hold that, as readers of literature, we cannot really suspend our feelings and ignore past experiences when reading a text. These elements of our personality are actively present when reading. Thus, it is important for teachers to realize how valuable these are in the process of shaping textual meaning (Small, 2009; Hsu, 2004; Amer, 2003; Liaw, 2001; Boyle, 2000; Iser, 1995; Goodrich, 1986; Duke, 1982). Rosenblatt believes that the reader, especially if adolescent, should be able to draw on his experiences to create meaning from the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). Iser (1995) contends that the text is actualized by the reader to become a visual aesthetic work. Because all readers are unique, they will have unique insights into the works they are reading which should be perceived as valuable within the reading experience.

Among many others who share Louise Rosenblatt's ideas David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, I. A. Richards and Tim Small. Together they have begun to develop an elaborate and convincing philosophical justification for reader response criticism. However, as often is the case, research and practice have tended to lag behind what is theorized. According to Duke (1982), teachers usually emphasize the efferent stance on reading. Their concern lies with recall of information presented in the text. For them, there is only a single correct interpretation the text content. Graham and Probst (1982) cite Scholes' description of a literature teacher at work, saying, "In the name of improved interpretation, reading was turned into a mystery and the literature classroom into a chapel where the priestly instructor... astounded the faithful with miracles of interpretation" (p. 31).

In such classrooms, where interpretation reigns supreme, students may be asked to write a critical essay on the interpretation of the text but, even here, teachers will often look for the "right" answer. Tests are built around the act of efferent reading, which devalues the lived through experiences the students undergo while reading. Even in their selections of literary work, didactic literature teachers tend to ignore students' interests, ages and lives. Thus, the chosen texts are far removed from the

students' lives and so cannot be related to. Duke (1982), Beach and Marshal (1998) attribute teachers' focus on efferent responses and their preoccupation with the different elements of the literary work, such as writing style, characters, language, theme and plot, to their training, which has seen the reader's role as passive and the reading of literature as a passive act (Rosenblatt, 1995; Esrock, 1994).

Such practices stifle students' creativity and go counter to the very rationale for using literature in the classroom (Small, 2009). Mario Valdez, as cited in Graham and Probst (1982) writes, "The central justification for literature is that it is an open source for self-realizing and fulfillment by the reader" (P. 30). Self realization and fulfillment are likely to be achieved by readers only when they develop an esthetic approach to reading literature.

In the fields of teaching English as a second (ESL) and a foreign language (EFL), very few ESL and EFL practitioners recognize the importance of reader response theories and their classroom application (Hsu, 2004; Amer, 2003). These feel it is essential to teach ESL readers how to handle a piece of literature from an esthetic perspective wherein the readers see the value of their own experiences and can apply their background knowledge (Scalone, 1998). Developing such a stance is believed to be a step forward in the empowerment of students and in boosting their confidence and self-esteem. When students feel that their experiences count, they are more willing to communicate orally and in writing their responses to the work (Hsu, 2004; Amer, 2003). Fear has no place here because there is no one absolute and correct interpretation. As long as students can find textual evidence to support how they feel and think about the messages or meanings in the text, their responses are as valid as those of the teacher or anyone else. It is this realization that brings the fulfillment and satisfaction that M. Valdez talks about when justifying the use of literature in the classroom.

Rationale

The rationale behind a reader response approach to teaching literature lies in assumptions about learning which emphasize the needs of students rather than those of teachers and administrators (Harris, 1982). Within this approach, students need opportunities to express their emotional reactions to the literary works they read. They need, that is, to be allowed to respond at the affective level. This activates students' experiences and background knowledge which are used to enhance their understanding of the work. Thus, aesthetic responses are important and should be encouraged.

With the growing belief in the value of an aesthetic stance, studies have been conducted to see how instructors teach and what responses they encourage; also how students really respond and what their responses focus on. The majority of these studies have been done in English as a First (L1) literature classes. Very few seem to be conducted in the second or foreign language classroom. The research's major findings suggest that teachers' own theories of reading and their perception of texts tend to influence dramatically the way they teach literature (Newell, McAdams & Spears-Burton; Zancenella; Grossman; as cited in Beach, 1993). Because many teachers were trained in New Criticism, their pedagogy ignores the affective aspects of the literary experience (Squire, 1964). It seems important and informative, therefore, to see how both teachers and students respond to literature in order to clarify the differences and to reflect on our practices. This can inform both our theory and practice.

Because of lack of studies in the EFL classroom, the present study was conducted in this context. It involved both native speaking English teachers with some experience teaching EFL or ESL and Omani students who speak Arabic as a native language and English as a second language. The study aimed to compare the responses of both groups and thus determine each groups' orientation to literature. A follow-up interview was conducted to clarify unclear responses and to give participants a chance to reflect on what they wrote.

Design of the study

A. *Procedure*

Three different stories were chosen, with each divided into a number of segments following the breakage method. This was to elicit immediate responses from students during the reading of each literary text. The breakage method has been used by researchers like Squire (1964) in his study “The responses of adolescents while reading four short stories” and textbook writers such as Scalone (1998). The researcher ascertained that none of the stories was familiar to the subjects. This was to ensure the novelty of the response and make sure that the comparison and contrast between subjects' responses was valid since the stories were all new to them.

Due to tight schedules, each subject was met alone at a time of his/her choice. All subjects were mentored, which means they were supervised while participating in the study. This was to make sure that they followed instructions, namely, to read each segment and respond without attempting to read the whole story and delay their response to the end. The instructions were both oral and written. Subjects were briefed about the study's aim and were instructed to read each segment separately and to write a response to it before proceeding to the next segment. The researcher saw that this was done by monitoring each subject while they read and responded. Subjects were encouraged to respond freely by informing them that there were no right or wrong answers because the target information sought was their own feelings, reflections and thoughts on the story. Some, especially the teachers, wrote the responses to all stories at one sitting especially the teachers, but some ESL subjects were met more than once to gather their responses to all the stories.

Once the responses were collected from all eight subjects, they were read and analyzed according to categories used by Squire (1964). These are seven and include:

1. Literary judgment responses, which contain direct or implied judgments on the story as a literary work, such as “the style of writing is simple”.
2. Interpretational responses that contain an attempt to make sense of the story.
3. Narrational responses that contain a retelling of the story without attempting an interpretation.
4. Associational responses in which the reader makes a connection between ideas or events in the story and his own experiences.
5. Self-involvement responses, which are those that contain an association between a reader's own feelings and those of the story's characters.
6. Prescriptive judgment responses, which involves prescribing courses of action for the characters or the story to undertake instead of those actually undertaken.
7. Miscellaneous responses cannot be included in any specific category.

One more category was added by the researcher and labeled “misinterpretation responses”. This enabled me to detect if misinterpretations occurred and discover causes of misinterpretation among native and non-native subjects.

Following analysis of the responses, the results obtained from the native speakers’ responses were compared with those obtained by the non-native speakers to see if any similarities or differences could be found.

B. Subjects:

As stated earlier, the study used two groups of subjects: four teachers who were native speakers of English and four students who spoke English as a second language. The teachers, whose ages ranged between 26 and 46, differed as regards years of experience (2-16 years). Three of the teachers were females and one was a male. The four Omani students were males and their level of language

proficiency was fair as they all had a TOEFL score above 500. They were of different majors. The main reasons for selecting the participants were their availability and willingness to participate.

C. Literary works:

Three stories were chosen for the study: “Charles”, “The Story of an Hour”, and “Two in One”. “Charles” was selected because it is a short story with clear events and a rather simple plot. It was thought that such a story would be easy to read for both the Omani students and the teachers. The story is about a little boy named Laurie starting his first days of kindergarten. Every day, he comes home with a story about a naughty boy named Charles and he tells this to his parents, who listen with enthusiasm. The parents become eager to learn more about this Charles and want to see his mother. However, it turns out that there is no Charles in Laurie’s classroom and that Laurie himself was the one causing trouble in the classroom.

“The Story of an Hour” is of similar length, but it contains more elaborate description and rich imagery. It is about a woman, Mrs. Mallard, who suffers from a heart problem and who receives news about the death of her husband. Her reaction was different from the reaction of other wives faced with the same news. She weeps first, then, she goes up to her room not allowing anyone to follow her. There, we, as readers, see how delighted she is about her husband's death. He, however, turns out to be still alive and the news about his death thus untrue. He comes home and when his wife sees him she drops dead. The researcher assumed that the subjects needed to pay attention to the story's language and images in order to describe the wife's feelings and understand and interact with the text.

The third story, “Two in One”, is longer than the first two. It is a mystery story of the Edgar Allen Poe type. It deals with a murder that is committed by a taxidermist, Murphy, who kills his boss, Kelly. It appears from the story that the killer is a person who is not in his right mind, but who, nevertheless, possesses a calculating mind and an evil character full of jealousy and cunning. To hide his

crime, Murphy, dons the skin of the murdered Kelly, which fits him perfectly. He goes out and takes the roles of his boss and nobody notices the difference. Since there is no perfect crime, however, Murphy miscalculates. He does not treat the skin he is wearing carefully enough so that when he puts it on it sticks to his own skin and it begins to perspire and live. Murphy cannot take off Kelly's skin and so he cannot switch roles (being Murphy whenever he wishes and Kelly whenever the need arises). The police notice that Murphy is missing and begin to suspect the man they perceive as the boss. Murphy gets arrested and charged with killing himself.

The story is simple and clear despite its length. The plot is different from the two previous stories and so it was thought that it would be interesting to see how subjects responded to such a difference.

D. Treatment:

The subjects did not receive any treatment in the true sense since the study is not truly experimental. All that was given to the subjects was the three stories, and in the following order: "Charles" first, "The Story of an Hour" second, and "Two in One" third. The first story, as stated earlier, was short and straightforward while the second was short but less straightforward. The plot in both stories contained something that the readers had to figure out for themselves: Charles being Laurie and the reason for the death of the wife, Mrs. Mallard. The third story was a bit longer yet very straightforward in terms of language; but the plot was different from the other two stories in that it contained irony, resulting from the murder case it deals with. The instructions subjects received included asking them to write their response after reading each segment of the particular story they were handling. The segments were marked on each story and subjects were shown where to start reading and where to stop to begin writing their responses. Subjects were instructed to write everything that occurred to them no matter how small or unimportant it might seem. They were also told that there were no right

or wrong answers and that they should feel free to write whatever they felt or thought about anything in the story.

E. Analysis of the data:

The data analysis started with the classification of responses into eight different categories, seven adapted from Squire and one added, which was “misinterpretations”. The last category was added because both the teachers and students were found to misinterpret some parts of the stories they responded to. The inclusion of this category was deemed important to provide an insight into the parts that may cause misunderstanding and misinterpretation in the part of the teachers or/ and students. The responses for each category were tallied and very simple descriptive statistics were applied to establish the comparison between the responses of both teachers and students. There are three different tables for the three different stories. Each table compares the responses of both groups.

Presentation of the results

The first story the subjects received was Charles. Table 1 presents the responses of the American teachers and the ESL subjects as found under the eight categories. For the responses to the story in general, the three responses with the highest scores are interpretational (48.5%), narrational (19%) and self-involvement (9.5%). Out of the 66 interpretational responses, 56 were the teachers' and only 10 were the ESL students'. Twenty one of the narrational responses were made by the teachers and only 6 were made by the students. Self-involvement responses were 5 for the teachers and 8 for the students. Thus the students' responses could be organized as follows: interpretational, self-involvement, and narrational, while for the teachers, they were interpretational, narrational and self-involvement.

It is worth noting that of the overall responses to the story there were 6.6% misinterpretations: the teachers made five out of nine of these while the students made just four. This finding will be highlighted more in the discussion of findings section.

Table 1: Responses to “Charles”

<i>Category</i>	Total		Teachers		Students	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1- Literary Judgment	6	4	5	5.1	1	2.4
2- Interpretational	66	48.5	56	56.6	10	23.8
3- Narrational	27	19.9	21	21.2	6	14.3
4- Associational	6	4.4	5	5.1	1	2.4
5- Self-involvement	13	9.5	5	5.1	8	19
6- Prescriptive Judgment	7	5.14	2	2	5	11.9
7- Miscellaneous	2	1.4	0	0	2	4.7
8- Misinterpretation	9	6.6	5	5.1	4	9.5
Total	136	100	99	100	37	100

<i>Category</i>	Total		Americans		ESL	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
9- Literary Judgment	6	5.5	6	8.5	0	0
10- Interpretational	49	45	37	52.8	12	30.7
11- Narrational	21	19.3	13	18.6	8	20.5
12- Associational	4	3.7	3	4.3	1	2.5
13- Self-involvement	6	5.5	2	2.8	4	10.25
14- Prescriptive Judgment	1	.09	1	1.4	0	0
15- Miscellaneous	6	5.5	2	2.8	4	10.25
16- Misinterpretation	16	14.7	6	8.5	10	25.6
Total	109	100	70	100	39	100

Table 2: responses to “The story of an Hour”

The table above shows the responses of both the teachers and the subjects to “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopan. The highest scores were in the following three categories: interpretational, narrational and misinterpretations. The scores for these categories were as follows: 45%, 19.3% and 14.7% respectively. For the teachers, the highest scores were in the following: interpretational (52.8%), narrational (18.6), misinterpretation (14.7) and literary judgment, self-involvement and miscellaneous responses (all 5.5%). The students scored highest in the following three categories: interpretational (30.7%), misinterpretation (25.6%) and narrational (20.5%).

Table 3 below presents both groups' responses to the story "Two in One". The general response pattern of both groups in the highest three categories is as follows: Interpretational (50%), Narrational (17.7%), and self-involvement (11.1 %). The overwhelming majority of the teacher responses were in the interpretational (54%), narrational, and self-involvement (both 13.7%) categories. The students' highest scores were in the interpretational (39.3%), narrational (26.8%) and miscellaneous (8.9%) categories.

<i>Category</i>	Total		Teachers		Students	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
17- Literary Judgment	15	8.3	13	10.5	2	3.5
18- Interpretational	90	50	68	54.8	22	39.3
19- Narrational	32	17.7	17	13.7	15	26.8
20- Associational	11	6.1	7	5.6	4	7
21- Self-involvement	20	11.1	17	13.7	3	5.3
22- Prescriptive Judgment	4	2.2	1	.8	3	5.3
23- Miscellaneous	6	3.3	1	.8	5	8.9
24- Misinterpretation	2	1.1	0	0	2	3.5
Total	180	100	124	100	56	100

Table 3: Responses to "Two in One"

Discussion of the Findings:

The study has yielded some very interesting findings. The responses of the teachers differed from those of the students more in quantity than quality in many respects. The teachers wrote a great deal in their responses due to their experience with teaching English and due to the fact that English is their first language. Student responses were short and sometimes poorly stated due to lack of proficiency, in English. Although the students chosen were supposedly of a similar level of English language proficiency based on their TOEFL, their responses were different and indicated a varying level of comprehension of the short stories. For all the stories, the response with the greatest score for both groups was 'interpretational'. This finding is similar to that of Squire (1964) who found that English as L1 students' responses were interpretational for the most part. Similarly, Al-Mahrooqi (2003) found that the most responses Omani students made to the four stories they read were interpretational. These findings can be explained by referring to the words of Robert E. Probst (2000: 61) who asserted that "We have, in much of our teaching of literature emphasized explanatory knowing-knowing that takes the form of propositions and demonstrations, generalizations and evidence, and thus we have privileged the expository, analytical paper in many of our courses." Both teacher training and practice have emphasized interpretation and minimized the value of actual engagement with the pieces of literature discussed in the classroom.

Narrational responses achieved the second highest score (18.8%). This ranked second among the responses of the two groups (17.4 for the teachers and 22.0 for the students) and across stories. The students tended to rely more on narration due to their imperfect language and their inability to interpret events (they mainly narrated them), a direct result of negative transfer of training from Arabic. Instruction in Arabic literature classes emphasizes recall of events in a narrative fashion and distances the learner from the literary piece.

Self-involvement scored (10.3%) of the overall responses. Out of the 44 self-involvement responses, the teachers had 24 (8.2% of the overall responses of teachers) and the students had 15 (11.4% of the overall responses of students). When we look at the percentages of the self-involvement category for each group, we can see that the students in fact scored higher (comparing their response in this particular category to the rest of responses in the other categories) than the teachers. This is a very interesting finding because it shows that students are capable of identifying with the experiences presented in the literary text if they bear resemblance to their lives (Rosenblatt, 1995; Squire, 1964).

There were some variations of responses between the two groups across the stories. The story “Charles” elicited more self-involvement responses from students than did any other story. This could be due to the fact that the story was short and clear in terms of language so students were able to understand it easily. Also, in the follow-up interview, three of the students said that they have smaller brothers and sisters and the story reminded them of how they behaved and acted. The story “Two in One” instigated more self-involvement responses on the part of the teachers. This could be attributed to the fact that the story is longer than the others and so had the potential to elicit more responses in general, as it did. Also the nature of the story is more like scientific fiction, the type people see in horror movies, which made those who saw movies of such a kind recall them with all the feelings of terror they experienced at that time. People coming from Europe or America are more acquainted with such movies than Omanis, for in Oman such movies are not very popular (only recently have they started gaining some popularity). “Two in One” was reported by the students as hard, and maybe that is the reason why they relied more on narrational responses than they did in the other two stories.

Because “The Story of an Hour” speaks, at least in part, about a universal experience which is experiencing the death of a dear person, it also engaged students and they wrote about experiences of loss they had gone through or knew of.

The teacher's over-concern with interpretation (48.2% of the responses compared to 10.35% of the self-involvement responses) reflects their own ideologies and beliefs regarding the teaching of literature. In a follow-up interview, two indicated that it is very important for the students to know what the text meant and what the author's intentions were. For them there was only one correct interpretation. When such an orientation guides practice, then, students learn that whatever they think or feel about the characters, events or any other aspects of the story, is not very important. They tend to wait for the teachers' explanation or clues to guess the intended message of the story.

Most literary and prescriptive judgments made throughout the stories were done by the teachers. This is to be expected because the students' language proficiency might not have enabled them to make many of these judgments. One of the four students used more of these than the other three. His judgment focused on the ease or difficulty of vocabulary, on the length of the stories and on what the characters should or should not have done. Most associational responses were also made by the American teachers and most of them occurred in the story "Two in One". Again, length here could be a factor in eliciting more associational responses.

The misinterpretations category presents an interesting case, as mentioned earlier, because it was not only the students who misinterpreted some aspects in the stories; some teachers did so too. However, the teacher with the most experience in teaching English and who taught literature classes more often than the others did not make any misinterpretations, a positive outcome of practice.

Conclusion

To foster self-engagement in the literature classroom by capitalizing on students' experiences and input is very important. It has been found that students learn more if they are made to feel that their experiences count and when their experiences are called into the learning process. Utilizing these experiences personalizes learning and fosters creativity (Small, 2009). Therefore, teachers need to make

use of a reader response technique in their literature classes (Amer, 2003) to uncover students' first-hand reaction to the literary piece they want to discuss and to find out points of personal involvement which might give them ideas about how to approach that piece of literature in a way that is engaging to the students.

It is important that teachers reflect on their personal reactions to the literature they teach because that will help them to reflect on their beliefs about teaching literature and will make clear to them their own responses to what they teach. Teachers can also share their personal responses with their students in an attempt to personalize their teaching and create a dialogue between teacher and students.

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