

## Teaching Short Stories through the Use of the Reader-Response Theory: Second-Year Students at Dr. Moulay Tahar University-Saida

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### Abstract

The Reader-Response Theory considers the learner as an active participant in extracting meaning from a literary work depending on his/her prior experience. Teaching literature critically allows the reader to create a sense, and compare the previous experience with the written text. Second-year students cannot decode and scrutinize a short academic text, which unveiled that they are unaware of the different types of readings. The research question arises in this vein is: To what extent does the Reader-Response Theory contribute to the development of the EFL students' skills? The piece of work aims at introducing and applying the Reader-Response Theory to teaching short stories to second-year university students. The current study was conducted on students taught by the teacher-researcher at Dr. Moulay Tahar University-Saida, Algeria. A questionnaire, observation, and the analysis of students' written assignments employed in the present work for the overarching aim of gathering data in a timely period. Yet, the results revealed that after implementing this approach, EFL students become aware of how to undertake an academic written piece. It also reinforces their thinking skills, and boosts their creativity.

Keywords: critical theory, second-year university students, short stories, teaching, the Reader Response Theory

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## Introduction

The teaching of literature has suffered in the past few years not because tutors lack the necessary material but due to the teachers' perceptions of the text. They used to consider a written text as a source of meaning and joy. They also used to force their students to admire the text (Karolides, 2000). Today, English as a foreign language teachers affirm that literature requires a profound and meaningful reading so that students can negotiate, interpret, compare their experience with the text, denounce the writer, more importantly, decode meaning. The work aims at introducing the Reader-Response Theory to teaching literature to undergraduate students of English who enroll in the Department of English at Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida, Algeria. The ultimate purpose is to focus on bridging the gap between reading short stories and writing. Furthermore, the research reveals the significance of literary texts as authentic materials that reinforce teaching reading-writing skills, and develop the students' thinking skills. Nonetheless, reading and writing are two essential skills that are thorny for EFL students owing to the severe deficiencies that they unveil at the levels of their writing pieces. Additionally, learners cannot decode meanings from an assigned text. Thus, the researcher formulates the following questions:

- a- What approach could foster the learners' reading-writing competencies?
- b- What are the prime responses generated when setting a short story?
- c- Can the students write a summary of the assigned text?

## Review of Literature

Reading literature is a complex process in which readers have to recall, retrieve and reflect on their previous experiences or memories for the ultimate purpose of building various meanings of the text. Yang (2002) reported that reading literature often has social dilemmas and conflicts. In other words, it requires personal answers from readers. Construction of meaning occurs when the reader selects and reflects on his/her responses. Doing so entails on the students' part to illustrate the following abilities:

- To differentiate facts from points of view.
- To comprehend meanings and understand the narrator's tone.
- To locate details related to the explained issues.
- To discover connections between the events or actions.
- To make moral reasoning and fair judgments.
- Most importantly, to apply what they have learned from this process to other fields.

The following graph reveals that the text and the reader share a connection, but the relationship between the author and the text remains undefined and unclear.

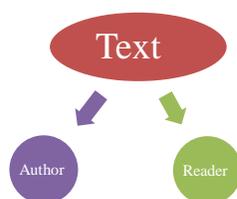


Figure 1. Text's Connection

Spirovska (2019, p. 22) explained the relationship between the text and the audience, “the reader-response theory views the text and reader interaction as mutually dependent. The text influences reader’s understanding and perceptions. The reader has an active role in shaping the text”. Mart (2019) reported that the reader-response theory depends on the text’s assumptions and relies on a mutual relationship between the audience and the literary work. According to Burn (2005), readers tend to “explain,” “analyze,” “synthesize,” “argue,” “interpret,” “evaluate,” “solve problems,” “infer,” “reason logically,” and “to apply.” All these capacities are effective critical thinking skills.

Rosenblatt (2005) claimed that the reader-response theory focuses on the reader’s experience, especially the emotional response and that there is not only one meaning of the text, but there are two kinds of readings:

- Reading for joy in which the reader enjoys reading a particular literary work.
- Reading because a student has to; the teacher assigned a text in the classroom.

Rosenblatt (2005) reported that the Reader-Response Theory (RRT) relies on the schemata that each student possesses. In other words, everyone constructs and interprets meaning based on prior knowledge. She refers to RRT as “*transactional*” because there is a relationship between the reader, and the text. Rosenblatt (2000) pointed out that in each academic piece, there is an experience because the reader and the text depend on each other. Hence, learning occurs naturally on an individual basis. However, a text does not have the same meaning for every reader; because each individual brings his/her knowledge, beliefs, and contexts to the transaction. Thereby, generating sense from text goes hand in hand with comprehension.

According to Rosenblatt (2005), there are two kinds of readings in the Reader-Response Theory

:



Figure 2. Efferent-Aesthetic Readings

The purpose of reading informational texts and reading for joy is very different. These two kinds of responses that all readers have to develop.

- The Efferent component focuses on reading for information and obtaining different responses from students. Efferent comprises a memorization element and includes information on characters’ names, places, events, etc.
- The Aesthetic component focuses on linking the text with the reader on an emotional level and, most importantly, connecting the literary work with students’ lives. The aesthetic element occurs primarily with literary works and describes how the text makes the reader feel.

Teachers of literature should incorporate both response types in the classroom to balance the language teaching of form and meaning-making (Rosenblatt, 1982).

**Strategy Examples that Utilizes the RRT**

The reader-response theory has significant implications for classroom practice. It is common for teachers to create follow-up or post-reading activities that encourage unique and individual responses:

- Brainstorming or webbing: are classroom applications realized before and after reading to determine the students’ background knowledge. Thus, brainstorming activates the individual’s schemata.
- During text reading: one popular activity based on the reader-response theory is making bonds in which students use three different types of relationships as follows:

Text to  $\longleftrightarrow$  self  
 Text to  $\longleftrightarrow$  text  
 Text to  $\longleftrightarrow$  world

Figure 3. Text’s Connection

Connecting the reader, text, and transaction leads to induce meanings and achieve comprehension.

The literary work has to offer linkage with the past experiences and interests, anxieties, and hopes of the reader so that the piece of literature will be vivid. In that sense, Wolfgang (2000) opined that the reader brings his/her private experiences while responding. Therefore, the learner will be autonomous, ready to participate in the classroom, and eager to know more about the literary text.

Schmidt (2002) considered several questions that literature teachers might inquire while applying the reader-response theory:

- What is.....?(Knowledge)
- What is.....? (Comprehension)
- What is .....connected/related? (Application)
- What are the significant components.....? (Analysis)
- What does.....mean? (synthesis)
- What is the value.....? (evaluation)

**Helping Students Reflect on Literature**

Teaching a literary work implies assisting the student primarily to reflect on what s/he has made of the text. The learner needs to be aware of the points at which his/her experiences have led excessively to emotional or biased reactions. On the other hand, if experience and knowledge have prevented appropriate participation in the work, the student has to scrutinize his/her response to the various aspects of the text to achieve comprehension (Rosenblatt, 1960). Hence, the teacher needs to focus on the following claims:

- Bring students and books together.

- Give them as many different types of literature as possible.
- Encourage honest and open responses.
- Challenge them to explore those responses and learn something about themselves.
- Encourage toleration.
- Encourage mutual understanding.

## Methodology

### *Research Instruments*

The researcher used three research instruments to guarantee triangulation: a structured questionnaire handed out to 70 students, classroom observation, and the analysis of students' extended essays. The teacher observed two groups, and scrutinized the students' written productions in 2019-2020. The researcher also analyzed her learners' written assignments in 2021, and observed five groups. Each group includes 25 students, approximately 125. The results are studied qualitatively and quantitatively to ensure research validity and credibility.

### *Participants*

The research sample is university students who enrolled during the academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 to continue their second year at Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida, Algeria. The investigation is a case study that involves plenty of university learners whom the researcher selected randomly. The investigator carried out this work in two academic years and with different learners to assure research reliability. Accordingly, the experimental groups of students in 2019-2020 are different from the learners of 2020-2021.

## Findings

The teacher appointed two short stories. The first one is "30 Days Carrying my Wife," and the second story is "Eveline." These two literary texts are designed for both the academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.

### *Analysis of Students' Questionnaire*

**Q1:** When reading a literary text, do you?

Table 1. *Students' Perception of the Literary Texts*

Options	Students	%
You read for joy	25	35.71
You compare your culture with the target one	60	85.71
Read critically	40	57.14
You connect the story's event	50	71.42
Make moral reasoning	30	42.85

The table above explains that twenty-five (25) out of seventy (70) informants reported that they read for joy; 35.71% represents the minority. Sixty (60) out of seventy (70) informants indicated that while reading, a text they compare their mother culture with the target one. 85.71% embodies the most of the learners; therefore, using the target culture in foreign classrooms is crucial. Fifty (50) out of seventy (70) respondents presumed that when tackling a text, they connect the sequence of stories' facts and events. It is also worth noting that 40 out of seventy

(70) (57.14 %) claimed that they read critically. Thirty (30) out of seventy (70) (42.85%) of informants stated that they make moral reasoning.

**Q2:** While reading, do you?

Table 2. *Students' Analysis of the Text after Reading*

Options	Students	%
Explain	40	57.14
Interpret and analyze	50	71.42
Infer and evaluate	60	60
Be creative	70	100

Table two suggests that forty (40) out of seventy (70) informants (57.14%) explain words and events while reading. Fifty (50) out of seventy (70) interpret and analyze the text to understand; thereby, they can answer the teacher's comprehension questions. Sixty (60) out of seventy (70) (60%) respondents which serve as the sweeping majority infer and evaluate the authentic material. All the students (100%) become creative after reading the assigned text.

### **Observation**

The teacher-researcher assigned a text for five groups in the academic year 2020-2021. The story is entitled "30 Days Carrying my Wife." Then, the tutor gave around thirty (30) minutes to read it carefully. While observing, some learners pretended to read, others read attentively. After finishing the assigned text, the teacher commenced asking some questions to evaluate and test the students' comprehension. The questions varied and posed from the easiest to the most complex one.

Second-year students enjoyed the text because it was first and foremost selective and social. Therefore, it stimulates the students' attention and emotions. Furthermore, the author's language and style were understandable and straightforward.

### **Post Reading**

The Reader-Response Theory incorporates great paramount in teaching literary texts and writing summaries at the end of the session. To implement the RRT, the researcher relied on strategies that would enhance the students' thinking skills. These techniques encompass the teacher's comprehension questions; inquiring the learners facilitates understanding. Subsequently, they will be able to see how the text is structured.

In other words, the teacher-researcher administered Rosenblatt's theory (2005) for applying The Reader-Response Theory in which the students did two different kinds of readings:

- a- Efferent reading.
- b- Aesthetic reading.

First of all, the assigned material, "30 Days Carrying my Wife," was a story that triggers the students' attention, for it is a romantic academic text. Hence, students read it for joy since it was a designed task. Secondly, students read it because they had to extract some meanings and draw conclusions.

### *The Efferent Reading*

The teacher urged her students to read the story for information. The tutor asked the learners to read the story in the classroom and then assigned some comprehension questions for the ultimate purpose of guiding the students. The students enjoyed the short story and was effortless and manageable to scrutinize the text because the teacher asked them to extract details such as: when and where the story takes place? And introduce the protagonists, etc. The teacher often made her students predict what would happen next in the short story to stimulate their interest. Additionally, she asked them to read profoundly about the focal events, and ask them to underline the significant facts to restate the story's incidents using their structure of sentences. The overarching objective of efferent reading is to unveil the students to the various steps that they ought to go through when undertaking a text.

Reading centers primarily on what will last after tackling a text, such as learning new vocabulary, knowing how to move from one event to another (the logical order of facts). For instance, in the academic year 2020-2021, students are assigned "Eveline" and are urged to read between the lines; to know about "Eveline" and her family, her love, and the reasons that made her crave for escaping Dublin. Furthermore, the focal point to be revealed about this short story is assuming responsibility and keeping promises. Dealing with 'Eveline,' students infer (oral discussion) that people endure some family problems as the protagonist and that teenagers elope in Algeria owing to domestic violence, poverty, and oppression. Learners provided numerous instances that created a hot conversation.

### *Aesthetic Reading*

Students must explore the text and engage deeply in the text's experience. In the conclusion of "30 Days Carrying my Wife," which has a moral lesson as it is a piece of advice given by the author, the teacher plumed the students' emotions in that; they compared their relationships. In other words, the author reported at the end of his story that what seems unimportant and uninteresting in a relationship is what matters; not the mansion, the car, money but minor details in one's life are crucial. Some students nodded; that implies that they join the writer's point of view, which states that 'tiny details could also encompass a simple smile.'

More importantly, the teacher urged the students to read and generate meanings; thus, compare the target culture with their own because literature and culture are intimately bound up and complement each other. It is worth mentioning that culture is a vehicle by which literature emanates values and beliefs. Literature is a deep ocean and has an airtight impact on culture. Therefore, EFL teachers ought to integrate the former as a significant component in foreign language classrooms for the prime aim of becoming acclimatized to the target culture. Hence, it is relevant to get different cultures and build bonds to the students' realm.

### *Analysis of Students' Written Productions*

After reading, the tutor asked her learners to rewrite the assigned texts "30 Days Carrying my Wife" and "Eveline" using what they have understood from Efferent and Aesthetic readings. The teacher also gave a task and requested her students to write a book report on the authentic material, from the setting moving to the climax shifting to the end of the story. The teacher asked the learners the following:

- Suggest another title.
- State the place and the time.
- Introduce the protagonists.
- Summarize the focal events.
- Summarize the end of the story.
- Create a different ending.

The tutor asked her students to use their vocabulary, grammar, and different writing mechanics. Most importantly, she also urged them to create their end to boost their critical thinking skills. In this part, students were creative; each learner provided his/her ending of the short story, which was satisfactory.

After scrutinizing the learners' extended essays, the researcher noticed that students did not find a significant hurdle with paraphrasing and summarizing techniques because they already tackled these strategies in methodology. They found it accessible to summarize the assigned text taking into consideration the tutor's instructions. Most importantly, applying the Reader-Response Theory helped the learners generate sense and compare the target culture with their mother culture, especially when debating in the classroom. It is worth noting that utilizing what they have learned in grammar was quite complex and thorny because the sweeping majority is mistaken when using the past tense.

### Discussion

To apply the RRT, the researcher asked several questions to the learners (to commence a dialogue) for the ultimate purpose of facilitating comprehension and showing them how to analyze a literary text. Asking comprehension questions drove the students to compare the two cultures; for example, it was manageable for them to conclude on the foreign culture. Most importantly, teaching short stories using the Reader-Response Theory enables the students to analyze and imagine themselves in the story's characters. Some of them were able to bring their prior experiences into the classroom. Notably, students summarized the short stories using their vocabulary and enjoyed listening to each other's end.

The students' questionnaire results equal those of the observation and those of the analysis of the written assignments. Learners read intensively (aesthetic reading) because the text is exciting and has cultural meanings. Additionally, students come up with inferences and compare their culture with the foreign one when the teacher facilitates comprehension by asking different questions from general to specific. Inquiring learners about the texts moving from the straightforward question to the end creates a debate among the students thus, raising their cultural awareness and communicative competence.

In brief, the obtained results in 2019-2020 go hand in hand with those of 2020-2021. Thereby, the Reader-Response Theory enhances EFL students' skills and language competencies. Second-year students generate several responses from reading texts such as explaining events, evaluating the author's language, comparing cultures, reasoning, inferring, and write summaries of the assigned short stories. Ningrum (2018) quoted My Van (2009), who asserted that the students' responses entail the readers' feelings, experiences, and knowledge

background. Accordingly, the teacher has to select a suitable text that meets the students' English proficiency and needs. An appropriate literary text has to immerse learners and engage them in the reading-writing processes.

### Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The focal objective of this piece of work is to provide a holistic idea of the Reader-Response Theory to teaching short stories and how the teacher applied it with second-year students. Having students create meanings from the text makes them aware of different interpretations of the literary material and would feel free to express themselves. The Reader-Response theory makes the students motivated, autonomous, and eager to know more about the text they have read. When getting prior experience and comparing the target culture with their own, a new adventure is appreciated. Applying the RRT guides the students towards thinking critically, and therefore be creative. Using the RRT enables EFL students to employ the English language via literature and teaches them to listen to other classmates. To conclude, teaching literature is fundamental and ought to have a place in the EFL classroom since it boosts the students' thinking skills and enhances creativity.

### About the author

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