

Reader-response Criticism in Teaching Literature for EFL/ESL Students at the University Level

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Abstract. The present study is in the fields of SLA, FLT/SLT, and critical theory, especially in reader-response criticism (RRC) of whose question of integration of language and content aspect is taken into consideration. The study is qualitative action research with some quantitative characteristics associated in forms of an ethnographic study. Its objectives are based on the linguistic grounds of Louise M. Rosenblatt (1972, 1985, 1999), Wolfgang Iser (1978, 1989, 2000), and Richard Beach (1988). Its main focus is not only on applying RRC in teaching literature but also in teaching English for EAP. The study aims at portraying the reality of teaching and learning literature in real educational settings through which teachers are provided with refined and selected teaching methods in RRC and students can benefit from this to gain content knowledge. Specifically, the study calls for an awareness in using RRC in literature-based English classes from which literature is used as a medium to learn academic subject matter, and as a means to improve students' language proficiency at the university level. It also implies an implicit purpose of developing teachers' pedagogical potential and improving students' cognitive academic language proficiency in literature-based classes in educational settings.

Keywords: Reader-response Criticism, Teaching Literature, EFL/ESL

1. Introduction

Culturally, literature has been seen as one of the most obvious and valuable means of attaining cultural insights. It provides a model of a culture, which might empower readers to overcome the limitations of sex or race. It also helps them overcome many barriers between cultures so that they can improve their communication across cultures.

Linguistically, literature models a wide range of communicative strategies. Through literature, EFL/ESL students are exposed to nearly every kind of communicative technique speakers use. It stimulates and improves students' language skills and linguistic competence. In other words, literature extends linguistic knowledge on the levels of usage and use.

2. Focus of the study

This study, generally, focuses on the implementing of RRC in the teaching of literature in ESL/EFL classes at the university-level. We made a great attempt to strengthen the theory; thus, placed great emphasis on investigating students' responses to literary texts. More specifically, the study concentrated on analyzing students' responses to literary texts in literature-based English classes. These responses were categorized into two domains respectfully so-called implicit responses (ImRs) and explicit responses (ExRs) which were investigated under labels of knowledgeable, experiential, psychological, sociological and cultural aspects.

Since learning literature cannot be separated from learning the target language which is the final aim of any language curriculum, the research questions to be addressed in this study are (i) What contribution can reader-response theory make to ELT in the university settings? and (ii) How should reader-response theory be made use of in teaching literature for ESL/EFL students at the university level?"

3. Methodology

3.1. Classroom Observations

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Classroom observation was carried out at the first and second stages. Twenty classes in each research site were observed in order to investigate the level of transaction, level of discourse production, and the linguistic, aesthetic, and socio-cultural aspects via reader-text transaction.

The student responses were categorized into two main domains: explicit responses (ExRs) and implicit responses (ImRs). ExRs includes four patterns of transaction (i) between individual student and the text, (ii) among individual student, instructor and the text, (iii) among individual student, other students and the text, and (vi) among individual student, instructor, other students and the text. The level of transaction was investigated through five different aspects: knowledge, experience, psychology, sociology, and culture and will be measured through the total unit acts or responses performed by individual student in each aspects across the total number of students in each observed class.

With ImRs, eighty papers were collected at random in each research site to investigate the level of transaction which was characterized into five different aspects: knowledge, experience, psychology, sociology, and culture. However, there was only one pattern of transaction in ImRs, that is, the one between individual student and the text. The responses were calculated by taking into the total unit acts or paragraphs written from individual paper in each aspect across the total number of paragraphs written in each paper.

3.2. In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews were conducted at the second stage with two students and two teachers in each research site. In these interviews, non-random sampling in which informal conversations were conducted with semi-structured and open-ended questions formatted on the basis of knowledge-related (K-R) questions, experience-related (E-R) questions, psychology-related (P-R) questions, sociology-related (S-R) questions and culture-related (C-R) questions (Beach, 1993). Each subject was interviewed for about 20 minutes each time and at three different stages. These interviews were recorded and the participants were required to listen to the playback and answer questions for introspective data.

3.3. Questionnaires

One hundred handouts were distributed to students in each research site. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, question items in student questionnaire were designed similar to the ones in student interviews, that is, they were deigned semi-structured with Yes/No and multiple choice questions formatted on the basis of K-R, E-R, P-R, S-R and C-R questions (Beach, 1993). In short, triangulation that can be seen through the use of different instruments to collect data at various stages in the ethnographic study such as questionnaires, classroom observations and in-depth interviews certainly have ensured the validity and reliability of the study.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Results and Analysis of Classroom Observations

The responses in observed classes at both research sites prove that (i) at both research sites, C-Rs (Cultural-related Responses) receive the highest level of transaction whereas E-Rs (Experience-related responses) and K-Rs (Knowledge-related Responses) receive the lowest level. Both S-Rs (Sociological-related Responses) and P-Rs (Psychological-related Responses) have similar results: they reach the high level. This asserts a fact that (i) students at both sites are interested in responding to S-R and C-R issues, (ii) students have poor experiences and do not have the habit of using schemata in responding to literary texts.

As for ExRs in RS1, we also take into consideration the different patterns of transaction (Pn) which are categorized into four types: (i) Pn1 between an individual student and the text, (ii) Pn2 among an individual student, an instructor and the text, (iii) Pn3 among an individual student, a group of students and the text), and (iv) Pn4 among an individual student, a group of students, an instructor and the text. The collected data reveals (i) C-Rs and S-Rs reach the highest level in all four patterns of transactions, (ii) K-Rs reaches the high level whereas E-Rs and P-Rs reach the lowest level. This suggests that when operating a stimulus for a certain type of response, teachers of literature should keep in mind that all the four patterns of transactions function dynamically in the transactional process and they are beneficial for students at any stage of the lesson. Regarding ExRs, E-Rs and C-Rs occupy the highest percentage while P-Rs and E-Rs occupy the

lowest. This reveals a fact that students in LS1 are good at responding to S-R and C-R questions, but not good at responding to E-R and P-R questions. In RS2, E-Rs and C-Rs occupy highest percentage whereas P-Rs and K-Rs occupy the lowest. However, students in RS2 are good at responding to E-Rs questions. This evidence displays a fact that even students in language environment are not good at responding to P-Rs and K-R questions. This suggests an idea that students should be encouraged to have recursive reading which evokes aesthetic feelings and which is considered one of the final aims of RRC.

Regarding ImRs, the number of paragraphs written by students in RS1 (766 paragraphs) is not as high as the ones in RS2 (423 paragraphs). This phenomenon reveals a reality that students in non-language environment do have difficulties in using the target language to express themselves as compared with the ones in the RS2. In addition, the physical conditions of the classes in RS1 are not well-equipped and the teaching aids are poor. This might influence the teaching quality and directly affects students' responses.

4.2. Results and Analysis of In-depth Interviews with Teachers and Students

The contents of the question items in the interviews and questionnaires with teachers and students were designed identically on purpose. This strongly facilitates the data collection process. The responses display a fact that (i) Teachers and students at both sites have much concern and interest in literature and relatively broad knowledge on language and language teaching and learning, (ii) Students' limited English proficiency and limited knowledge on culture are obstacles that hinder their responses to literary texts (iii) Students in LS1 are not confident in using the target language to respond to literary texts whereas students in RS2 have great confidence to express their personal viewpoints, and (iv) Teachers in both sites feel that the materials are challenging to their students, the meaning of literary text changes by generation, and literature is a fruitful means in developing students as whole persons. All these responses might lead to some facts (i) Teachers and students' interest, concern and broad knowledge on ELT/ELL are big advantages to decide the success of teaching and learning literature in reality, (ii) To solve cultural problems in real class, teachers of literature should have their students discuss C-R issues more often and create comfortable class atmosphere, (iii) materials should be proper to students' English level, (iv) Meaning in literary texts might change according to students' viewpoints of each generation, and (v) Facilities and technologies have a positive influence on the content of the responses and on students' learning attitude.

4.3. Results and Analysis of Questionnaire with Students

With multiple choice questions, the responses in questionnaires for students at both research sites prove that (i) their knowledge on distinctive features of fiction, poetry, and drama is sufficient, (ii) students have problem in understanding the plot, taking part in classroom activities, having difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary, (iii) students in RS1 learn literature with the purpose of practicing and improving their English whereas students in RS2 for enjoying and enhancing their appreciation of literature, and (vi) most of the students in RS1 expect their teachers to help them with unfamiliar vocabulary while the students in RS2 expect their teachers to help them cope with the length of literary texts. Responses also reveal that (i) half of the students in RS1 are interested in learning poetry while more than half of the students in RS2 are fond of learning fiction, (ii) the length of fiction or drama is really a problem for students in SR1, (iii) students in RS1 like discussing during the classroom whereas students in RS2 like role playing most. In short, students in both research sites seem to be fond of taking part in cooperative classroom activities. In addition, students in RS1 are interested in discussing C-R issues whereas students in RS2 prefer learning taboos, metaphoric, connotative meanings, humor, genre.

With Yes/No questions, the responses reveal that (i) students in RS1 do rely on critics' comments whose viewpoints they do not agree whereas students in RS2 have much confidence when expressing their personal ideas, (ii) students in both sites do like learning literature but have problem with figurative language, and a small number in RS1 have the feelings of frustration, inferiority, or powerlessness when asked to read texts so alien to their experience and cultural background, (iii) currently-used materials in both sites are challenging to students in terms of cultural difference, and materials used for students in RS1 do not often deal with social issues whereas students in RS2 use materials full of social issues, and (iv) students at both sites have to use social and historical knowledge to explore the content of literary texts. All these pieces of information prove that (i) students in RS1 lack confidence and their critical thinking skill is limited since

they learn literature in a non-language environment and their language proficiency is not sufficient to express themselves, (ii) students' interest in learning literature is a big advantage that helps teachers conducting literature-based classes successfully, (iii) students can use material sources to support their responses to literary text. This also implies that (i) knowledge especially on culture plays an extremely important role in helping students explore and comprehend literary texts; without this knowledge, students might feel that the content of these texts are too remote to understand, (ii) the meaning of a literary text can change according to reader's viewpoints in each generation and leaning literature can stir up students' consciousness.

4.4. RRC and its Linguistic Contributions to ELT/ELL

Linguistically, RRC can make some contributions to FLT/SLT. First, *reader-text transaction in RRC helps re-evaluate values of literary work*. In light of RRC, the transaction between St -T takes place dynamically and mutually. Students have to activate schemata, use personal viewpoints, prior knowledge, and experiences to give their judgments. Facts from texts are treated as bases or cues for their interpretations. They cannot interpret without information supplied from texts and a text does not make sense without students' personal ideas. In other words, without either of these elements--student or text--a literary work is merely an impersonal medium. Second, *RRC asserts the important role of students in the learning process*. Results from the questionnaires and interviews prove that a literary work exists only when a student and a text interact. Thus, students' personal contribution is an essential element in the reading process and therefore, reader response teachers are required to create a setting that makes it possible for students to have a spontaneous response to literature. Third, *RRC evokes aesthetic readings*. In light of RRC, language is seen as an impersonal medium that students add the affective elements to the meaning of literary texts. In the reading process, together with what students sense of the words and the world, a synthesis of the affective, cognitive and intellectual elements forms the basis for their responses. Students bring all these characteristics into their responses and thus make them sound aesthetic. In this sense, RRC not only evokes aesthetic readings but the ideas of aesthetic readings, living experience, reader-text transaction also form a new function of literature.

Fourth, *RRC stimulates students' critical thinking skill and creative writing*. In light of RRC the reading process is interactive; that is, meaning is created through the student's interaction with the text. A work's meaning cannot be determined without considering the student's reaction to the text. Meaning, therefore, is created partly by what is supplied by a work and partly by the student. The meaning a work supplies is the information that enables students to follow a plot of a story, the action of a play, or the development of a poem. In addition, a work also conveys the writer's social, political, class, and gender attitudes. This might help students form their personal viewpoints or perspectives. Fifth, *RRC helps students be aware of their interpretations*. It is important to mention here that RRC encourages recursive reading and a literary interpretation must originate from the text, that is, must have a basis in fact. Students are encouraged to read and re-read a text and can contribute their ideas based on their own perspective on condition that they cannot ignore or contradict evidence in the text to suit their personal biases. From this viewpoint, RRC helps them be aware of their interpretations.

4.5. RRC and its Contributions to ELT/ELL

Educationally, RRC also have great contributions to ELT/ELL. First, *RRT evokes aesthetic feelings*. It is believed that aesthetic readings create aesthetic feelings. What students read in literary texts could more or less influence their thinking, feelings and behaviour; thus, texts with aesthetic characteristics could enhance students' aesthetic feelings. In other words, literature may offer an emotional outlet for students and students can seek in literature a variety of personal satisfactions that might evoke aesthetic feelings. Second, *RRC enhances students' appreciation and enjoyment of literary work*. The major function of literature education is the development of good reading and good writing, and the nature of aesthetic reading in RRC certainly might help students enhance their appreciation and enjoyment of literary work. Third, *RRC evokes human emotions and relationships*. RRT begins with the reader or the student. Learning literature, therefore, might awaken within students the feelings of humanity and human experience.

4.6. RRC and its Socio-cultural Contributions to ELT/ELL

Culturally speaking, RRC also contributes a great deal to ELT/ELL. First, *RRT helps readers be aware of other cultures*. It can be said that literature the major value of literature to EFL/ESL students is its cultural content. Therefore, what students expect to acquire from literature is something more than merely language acquisition. Since literature provides a model of a culture, it becomes a valuable means of attaining cultural insights. This function should be stressed in ESL/EFL programs since literature is a link between life and culture. Moreover, in light of RRC, each student is seen as an individual with his own experiences, viewpoints, and emotions. He will bring into his interpretations his own culture as trying to respond to the literary work. This adds to the richness of individual reader's interpretations and helps him understand what people of other cultures think, act and behave. Second, *RRC helps readers make sense of life via literature*. Reading literature in English encourages students to become aware of the social, political and historical background of a particular play or short story. Literature also helps educate how a member of a particular society might behave or react in a specific situation. This could familiarize students with social issues to be expected in such a setting. In this sense, it is not necessary to avoid cultural problems found when teaching literature. Students can benefit from dealing with such problems because they can develop their own creativity by surmounting those cross-cultural barriers. In short, RRC can help learners overcome many barriers between cultures. They might be exposed to other cultures besides their own; as a result, they become more responsive and could improve their communication across cultures.

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