

The Interplay of Gender, Reading Stance and Literary Responses in Malaysian ESL Literature Classroom

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Abstract. This study seeks to examine English language learners' written responses to a story. The participants were 46 secondary school students aged 16-17 (equally divided between gender) with good English proficiency. The participants first completed a questionnaire on their reading habits and preferences. Next in the written task, the participants were instructed to: i) comment on the character that touched them the most and, ii) discuss the theme of the story. Based on the questionnaire, all participants considered themselves as good readers who spent between one to two hours per week reading for pleasure. While analysis on the participants' responses indicated that their responses to the question on character elicited more aesthetic response types (*association, self-involvement, prescriptive judgments*) and a theme-based question generated more *interpretations* and *literal recalls*. Closer analysis also revealed that *effluent reading stance* was predominant among the participants. The final section presents discussion and implications of the study.

Keywords: Aesthetic Responses, Efferent Stance, English Language Learners, Literary Reading.

1. Introduction

The Curriculum Specifications for English in Malaysian secondary schools have outlined the Aesthetic Language Use as one of the goals for learners to master by the end of the academic year. Through aesthetic language use, "learners are to enjoy literary texts at a level suited to their language proficiency and develop in them the ability to express themselves creatively" through activities that require them "to listen to, read, view and respond to literary works" (English Specifications, 2003). With such emphasis placed on learners' own personal and creative responses during literature class, it stands to reason that more research should be conducted to investigate in-depth the process of reading and responding to literary works by English language learners. However such studies on close analyses of secondary school students' literary response types have been found wanting. This is evident when much research on literature in the ESL classroom centres on the outcomes or the products of teaching methods (Ab. Rashid et al. 2010; Sidhu et.al, 2010; Hwang & Embi, 2007); with focus on reader response approach (Zainor et.al, 2010; Vethamani & Nair, 2009; Dhanapal, 2010; Thamburaj, 2007; Vethamani & Keong Too, 2008; Ali, 1993). In line with the advancement of information and communication technology (ICT), there are also studies on web-based multimedia application (Sivapalan & Wan Fatimah, 2010) and mobile technologies in learning literature (Rahamat et. al, 2011).

1.1. Objective and Research Questions

Hence this study seeks to address the gaps and provide information on the the private reading of learners and the aesthetic transaction (or lack thereof) that takes place as reflected by their literary responses. This information is of great significance to both learners and educators as it highlights the issue of individual differences in private reading of literary texts which may not be addressed and attended to by classroom methodology alone. To accomplish the objective stated, the study is guided by the following questions:

- What are the response types produced by the English language learners towards one story?
- Do question types and gender difference influence the response types produced by the learners?

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Response towards Literature

Reading literary texts can best be optimised through the aesthetic stance as opposed to efferent stance which is reading for information or facts. In literary reading, the aesthetic stance is best adopted as the reader focuses on or attends to his personal feelings, sensations, images, ideas and attitudes evoked by the *sound* of words on pages (Rosenblatt, 2005:75). It is such evocation that becomes “the object of the reader’s “response” and “interpretation,” during and after the reading event” (Rosenblatt, 2004:1373). Rosenblatt’s theory on the transaction between the reader and the text is on reading literature in general and its identification of response sources is primarily *subjective or experiential* (ideas, feelings and memories).

Whereas in the context of second language learning, the evocation of literary responses can stem from the *internal* (learners’ own knowledge and experiences) and *external* (the formal or linguistic features of the text itself). For example, studies by Kadir et. al (2012a, 2012b) provide evidence of how literary responses by ESL learners were also evoked by the formal features of the text (literary devices) and the story world (identification and empathy with character). Hanauer (1999:15) also posits that by selecting, focusing on and analysing specific textual and world knowledge aspects of a literary text, learners can enhance their interpretive skills.

The significance of examining responses to literature have also been documented by Richards (2003) who used a response diary to facilitate school students’ development of reading stance to texts and Carlise (2000) whose use of reading logs helped improve his students’ writing and reading skills in responding to novels. While from another perspective, Chittra et. al (2010) and Dhanapal (2010) analysed the elements of creative and critical thinking skills in the literary responses produced by English language learners. Currently, in line with the development of technology and multimodality in reading, researchers have also studied responses in graphic novels (Griffith, 2010), hypertext fiction (Gardner, 2003), e-book reading (Larson, 2010) and digital literary response (Whitin, 2009).

Having presented an overview on previous studies on responses to literature, the present study seeks to add to the literature on ESL learners’ literary responses by extending its perimeter to include:

- categorising the response types evoked by two different questions
- identifying gender difference (if any) in regard to response types
- discussing the notion of learners’ response types with their reading stance

2.2. Research Design, Participants and Instruments

This is a naturalistic inquiry or qualitative study using *intact groups design* with preexisting classes from which the participants were selected. It adopts a naturalistic inquiry design because learners’ written responses were documented and analysed in their “naturally occurring classroom” to capture the “qualities and attributes” of such occurrence (Nunan & Bailey 2009:7). In this study, the learners’ personal readings of and interactions with literary texts are regarded as one “naturally occurring” classroom event, befitting Rosenblatt’s idea that “every reading is an event or a transaction” between a reader and a text occurring at a particular time in a particular context (2005:7).

The participants were 46 secondary school students (aged between 16-17) from two classes in a fully-residential school in a suburb area in Malaysia. They were equally divided between gender and homogeneous in terms of native language, race and culture. At the time of the study, the participants had spent four years at the hostel during which they were exposed to the same academic environment and hostel lives. In regard to English proficiency, these participants could comprehend, read, write and speak English very well.

2.3. Procedure

One English teacher was entrusted with the task of teaching one story text to all participants from the two classes. Prior to the teaching, the participants completed a questionnaire on their reading habits and preference. Then the teaching of the text was conducted in a one-hour lesson per week for four weeks with each lesson containing an *instructional episode*. An *instructional episode* is a unit of analysis for language classroom research comprising of instructional materials with clear beginning and ending points for both the teacher and the learners (Donato & Adair-Hauk 1992:77). In the present study, each instructional episode

contained reader response-oriented activities beginning with teacher instruction, group work, whole-class discussion and lastly individual written response.

Upon completion of the story, the participants wrote their responses based on two questions: i) to comment on the character that touched them the most (Task 1) and, ii) to discuss the theme of the story (Task 2). The participants’ written responses were then grouped and analysed based on a combination of response categories by Squire (1964) and Miall and Kuiken (2002):

- Type 1: Literary judgment.
- Type 2: Interpretation.
- Type 3: Literal recall or retelling.
- Type 4: Association.
- Type 5: Self-involvement
- Type 6: Prescriptive judgment.

It is further proposed that response types 4, 5 and 6 are “aesthetically oriented” as readers create link between their personal experience with the texts (*association*), identify with the character in the story (*self-involvement*) or prescribe a course of actions to be taken by the character (*prescriptive judgment*). On the contrary, response types 1, 2 and 3 may be evidence of *efferent reading stance* adopted by the readers as they evaluate the external criteria or quality of text (*literary judgment*), comment on what to be learnt from the text (*interpretation*) and merely narrate the story without interpretive efforts (*literal recall /retelling*).

2.4. Analysis of Data and Findings

To facilitate coding of responses, the teacher in charge and the researcher worked on several scripts to achieve an interrater agreement of over 90% after which the teacher started categorising the participants’ responses. Each unit of analysis for response was based on one sentence written by the participants. In total, there were 460 responses elicited in task 1 and 1065 in task 2. The data obtained were displayed in a graph bar (Figure 1).

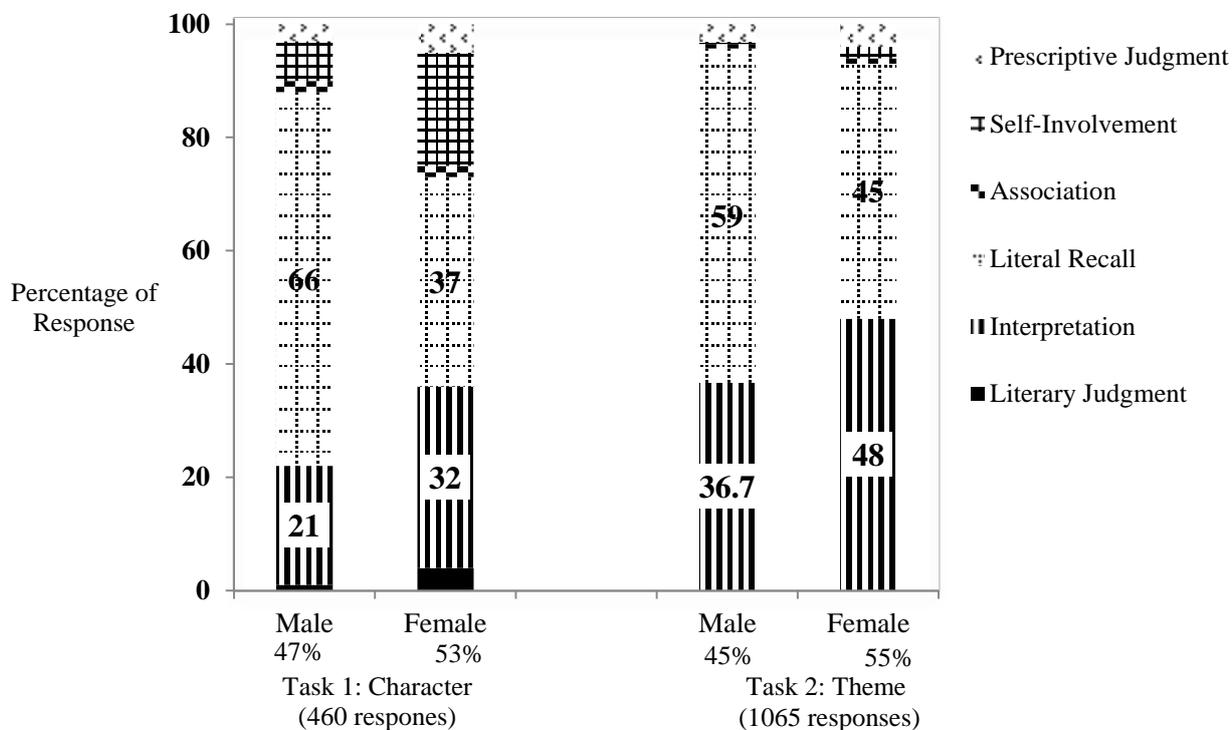


Fig. 1 Comparison on Response Types between Gender in Character-based and Question-based Tasks

Based on Figure 1, it was revealed that firstly, there was homogeneity in the response types produced by male and female participants when responding to both character and theme of the story. The predominant

response type was *literal recall*, followed by *interpretation* and *self-involvement*. This finding answers Research Question One aimed at describing the response types produced by the English language learners.

Secondly, a similar pattern also emerged when the participants commented on the *character* that touched them the most. More *self-involvement* and *association* response types were produced by the participants in responding to a question on character compared to a theme-related question. This finding provides answer to Research Question Two on whether question types influence learners' response types. Through identification with the character, the participants may be more likely to *associate* themselves with and *get involved* in what the character feels, thinks or experiences.

2.5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal the learners' inclination for literal recall and interpretation when responding to the story, supporting Schooten et. al's (2001) claim that in responding to literature, individuals do have inclination towards certain response types. Nevertheless, a major highlight in this study is the predominance of "non-aesthetic" response types among the participants regardless of gender, different question focus and the teaching approach. In regard to question types, to comment on a character and to discuss a theme in a story present two different perspectives for learner responses. The former provides better opportunity for the learners to engage with the character through empathy and identification hence leading to aesthetic response types. While in discussing a theme, learners may be inclined to focus more on narrating the story and the moral values to be learnt thus producing more efferent-oriented response types. However in this study, both questions elicited *yet* efferent response types (*literal recall* and *interpretation*) from the learners. Furthermore, the reader response approach used in the class, did not lead to more aesthetic responses from the learners. This is despite empirical findings from many studies which supported the contribution of such approach in facilitating readers' aesthetic transaction with text. An even more interesting point to highlight comes from the information provided by the learners in the questionnaire on their reading habits and preference. From the questionnaire, it was revealed that almost all of the learners considered themselves as good readers who enjoyed reading and spent one to two hours per week reading for pleasure. In addition, the types of books preferred by most male participants were sports fiction, mystery and science fiction while their female counterparts preferred mystery as well, followed by romance and fantasy. Both gender displayed varied reading preferences with an exception of mystery genre.

The findings above reveal that in regard to reading and responding to a story, this group of English language learners has inclination for adopting an efferent reading stance as evident in their predominantly "non-aesthetic" responses produced. Even when different questions were used to elicit responses and the best approach was adopted to optimise their literary reading experience, *literal recall* and *interpretation* still took centrality. Probably the homogeneity of this group of participants may have contributed to the kind of "community of readers" that they were made up of. As mentioned in the previous section, all of them were fully-residential students with good English proficiency, who had spent four years staying at the hostel, exposed to the same academic and social environment. The findings may set to become the point of departure for future research to study in-depth group homogeneity and literary reading experience in the ESL classroom. It will be of great significance also, to conduct case studies on the learners' individual process of reading and responding to literature to identify individual differences despite the group homogeneity.

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