Investigating the Benefits of Adopting the Reader-Response Approach in the EFL Literature Classroom

بحث فوائد اعتماد نهج استجابة القارئ في الفصل الدراسي الأدبي للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

The Reader-response techniques are normally adopted in the classroom with the aim of encouraging students to interact with the text thus moving steadily towards critical appreciation of the text and literary competence development. This article aims to discuss the significance of adopting the Reader-Response Approach and its effects on EFL literature students and on their literary competence. The novel is the genre that was selected to address the issue. The study employs a quasi-experimental design, using a control group and an experimental group, in addition to a students' questionnaire and students' documents' analysis as research tools, in addition to the selected literary text which is Wolitzer's "The Interestings". The findings suggest that the RRA does enhance students' literary

competence and literary response to the novel, it frees the reader from traditional and conventional responses.

Keywords: Reader-Response Approach; Response; Literary Competence; EFL Literature Students; Novel.

الملخص:

عادةً ما يتم تبني تقنيات استجابة القارئ في الفصل بهدف تشجيع الطلاب على التفاعل مع النص وبالتالي الانتقال بثبات نحو التقدير النقدي للنص وتنمية الكفاءة الأدبية. يهدف هذا المقال إلى مناقشة أهمية تبني نهج استجابة القارئ وتأثيره على طلاب أدب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية وعلى الكفاءة الأدبية لديهم في فهم وتحليل النص الأدبي. الرواية هي النوع الذي تم اختياره لمعالجة هذه القضية. توظف الدراسة تصميمًا شبه تجريبيًا ، باستخدام مجموعة تحكم ومجموعة تجريبية ، بالإضافة إلى تحليل استبيان الطلاب ووثائق الطلاب كأدوات بحثية، بالإضافة إلى النص الأدبي المحدد وهو رواية *ني إنترستينغس* للكاتبة ميغ ووليتز. تشير النتائج إلى أن نهج استجابة القارئ يعزز كفاءة الطلاب الأدبية والاستجابة الأدبية للرواية ، فإنه يحرر القارئ من الاستجابات النمطية والتقليدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نهج استجابة القارئ، الاستجابة، الكفاءة الأدبية، طلاب أدب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الرواية.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, pre-modernist and modernist critical discourse focused particularly on the text or the context as meaning holders and marginalized the reader as an active

participant in the reading process. Modern approaches were introduced in the 1950s and 1960s by Formalists and New critics (anticipated by Russian Formalism around 1915-1930) who brought the literary text to the fore and emphasized the tradition of close reading.

The Reader Response Approach is based on the Reader Response Theory. It imposed itself as a student-centered method of teaching and reading literature and is now having a growing influence on literature classes both in L1 and EFL/ESL contexts. Numerous researchers were interested in the works of Rosenblatt and Iser, and have explored the impact of their theories on the language classroom. In Algeria, it seems that few if any studies are conducted in this regard.

The rationale behind the use of the Reader Response Approach to teaching literature is the belief that students' needs matter in the learning process (learner-centeredness). Students become enthusiastic when personally involved in a teaching situation. As for literature, they need opportunities to express their emotional reactions to the literary works they read. This 'aesthetic reading' activates students' experiences and background knowledge, which are used to enhance understanding and increase pleasure. Three research questions govern this study:

• Is there a significant relation between the Reader-Response Approach and the enhancement of Students' literary competence?

• Does the Reader-Response Approach enhance students' literary response for young adult literature?

• What are the benefits of the Reader-Response Approach in the EFL classroom?

Within this course of thought, a study was undertaken at the English Department at the University of Oran 2, Algeria, to

measure the extent to which the Reader-Response methodology contributes to the development of students' literary response abilities to fiction and literary competence. The study has been carried out with a focus on teaching literature at 3rd year level.

2. Literature Review

Reader-Response theory is having a growing influence on English as a foreign language (EFL), literature theory in English language teaching (ELT) classes (Carlisle, 2000; Hirvela, 1996; Elliot, 1990). Based on the literary theory of Rosenblatt (1995), reader response theory emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text. The reader with the creative role brings his or her own cultural background and socialization to the text. The meaning, therefore, that the reader creates from the text is synthesized with the text and the life context the reader brings to the text (Rosenblatt, 1991). Rosenblatt describes two stances toward reading: efferent and aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1985). Rosenblatt (1995) found that a reader takes an efferent stance when the goal of reading is to gain information from the text (e.g. textbooks, newspapers, etc.).

Admittedly, the teaching of literature as an aesthetic experience frees teaching of literature from the narrow restrictions imposed by, what Carlisle calls, 'information-gathering exercises' (Carlisle, 2000).

On the contrary, in the reader response theory, the act of reading is viewed as an active, dynamic process in which readers are in charge of the exploration and development of meaning. In such a context, a variety of personal interpretations and analyses, based on not only the textual elements but also the reader's personal views, experiences and feelings are welcomed (Padley, 2006;Tyson, 2006; Diyanni, 2000). Rosenblatt

contends that the teacher should accept 'multiple interpretations' to a text rather than just one 'correct interpretation' (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Several activities and techniques have been used to apply the response based theory in EFL literature teaching: Reading Logs (Benton & Fox, 1985, 1990; Carlisle, 2000); Response Journal (Sheridan, 1991); Critical Questioning and Writing (Probst, 1994; Hirvala, 1996); Selfquestioning (Davis, 1989). The main task proposed in this paper is centred on student-written reading logs originally put forward by Benton and Fox (1985: 121). Carlisle, a leading proponent of this activity, contends that through keeping a log, the hope is that the learner's reading experience will go beyond literal understanding and move towards aesthetic appreciation of the text (Carlisle 2000: 14).

The literary genre used in this study is the novel. The benefits of using the novel in EFL literature teaching have been highlighted by many ESL/EFL practitioners. Many scholars (Lazar, 1993; Collie & Slater, 1987, Fowler, 1977) have presented compelling arguments for teaching novels in EFL/ESL classes.

3. Experimental

The selection of the type of research is based mainly on the nature of the research itself. The purpose of this study is to investigate the benefits of using the Reader Response-based teaching practices in the EFL literature classroom. It seeks also to examine the RRA adequacy and efficiency in terms of students' degree of literary response to the novel, more specifically, the young adult novel. The subjects are third year EFL students at the department of English at Oran 2 University.

The present section describes the methodology used in order to answer these questions.

3.1 Research Design

The quasi-experimental design is most appropriate for the present research as it ensures valid and reliable results. A comparison of the results of the approach under investigation with those of the conventional approach would allow us to arrive at conclusions. The researcher opted for such a design to demonstrate the causative relationship between the variables, i.e., the RRA implementation (independent variable), literature response abilities and literary competence (dependent variables). Quasi-experimental research design involves the manipulation of an independent variable to observe the effect on one or more dependent variables. This design can also be described as a static group comparison because of the absence of a pre-test identical to the posttest in content through a pre-testing questionnaire is administered. After the experimental group receives treatment, posttest observation of dependent variables is carried out for both groups to assess the effect of the treatment on the experimental group.

3.2 Population

Following the requirements of the research, a population of students was needed for administering a pre-reading questionnaire and a writing posttest designed for these students. Teachers as participants were not needed as the research purpose concerns primarily the students. The population for this study was third year EFL students at the department of English at

Oran 2 University. The population covers 02 groups and makes an approximate total of 80 students.

3.3 Sampling and Research Informants

The sample is a subset of the population used. An important issue in sampling is that every individual in the population should have an equal chance of being selected to take part. This decreases bias and increases the validity of the research. The representative population (the sample) that participated in the study consisted of two groups including both males and females. One group was the control group. It comprised 35 students and was taught *The Interestings* using the conventional method of teaching literature. The other group was experimental. It comprised 35 students. It was taught the same novel but subjected to testing the Reader-Response Approach.

3.4 Instruments for Data Gathering

To serve the purpose of the study, data collection tools were used and these consisted mainly of a pre-reading questionnaire administered to the students, writing assignments (reading logs/journals) that were regularly submitted to the researcher and a final writing assignment at the end of the intervention period employed as a posttest.

3.5 Findings and Data Analysis

As stated in the sections above, the main objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of using the Reader-Response Approach to teaching literature in the EFL classroom,

and to look for ways of promoting the teaching of literature in the Algerian university. To achieve this objective, different research tools were employed.

3.5.1 Pre-reading Questionnaire Analysis and Interpretation

The questionnaire, which is a shortened version of Miall and Kuiken's LRQ, covers seven sections. The participants were asked to rate the extent to which each statement was true for them using a scale:

Table 1. Structure of the students' pre-reading questionnaire

Section	Section title	Number of items
1	Insight	6
2	**Empathy**	3
3	**Imagery Vividness**	4
4	**Leisure Escape**	4
5	**Concern With Author**	5
6	**Story-Driven Reading**	4
7	**Rejection of Literary Values**	4

Source: Designed by the authors themselves

Using a five points Likert-type scale, the researcher obtained the necessary data. The data obtained from the pre-

reading questionnaire were an inevitable test to start the experiment with. The numerical data shown in the "insight" section allow us to understand the way participants interact with and respond to literature. Almost half of the control group (47,67%) read literary works with insight into what it teaches about people and life in the real world of the reader regardless of the level and degree of this insight. i.e., developing a sensitivity to aspects of their own lives and the lives of others and making a connection between literature and the real world. The data in the "empathy" section yields information about participants' projective identification with fictional characters, i.e., their ability to understand and share the feelings of characters. 46% of the group can identify, though to varying degrees, with the people and places they read about in fiction but 53.99% of the students have a limited capacity of empathizing with characters that needs to be boosted.

The percentages from the "imagery vividness" section makes it clear that almost half of the control group (46.75%) are able to use their imaginative abilities to elaborate a literary world that is vividly present not only visually as text but also as a whole experience of feelings and sounds and smells. They can develop an emotional response to characters and events that enables them to read aesthetically and go beyond the literal meaning of a work to reach a deeper level of understanding. This fact, unfortunately, does not hold true for the 53.25% of the group members who lack a more intense and productive sense of imagination. What can logically be deduced from the data in the "leisure escape" section is that most participants (65%) are not motivated enough to read literature in their free time. Reading is conceived instead as part of their academic studies and their motivation is primarily instrumental. Another underlying fact that can be deduced is that these students emotional interaction

with fiction must be limited which makes their general appreciation for literature insufficient and needs to be increased. As expected, the bulk of the control group members (67%) do not consider the author's biographical data or his/her distinguishing stylistic features important. They generally perceive knowledge about the author as extra information irrelevant to literary criticism. It is not surprising that the majority of students have an approach to reading that is focused on the plot or story-line with particular emphasis on action and unexpected endings. This approach which is obviously an essential condition for pleasure leads to literal understanding only if not combined with other levels of response such as empathy and interpretation. The participants do not possess the requirements of good responsive reading, but their judgments about the value of literature are positive. The paradox here is that they acknowledge the importance of literature as a scholarly study and its moralizing effect but fail to develop sufficient motivation to read.

The bar-graph below shows the percentages of positive responses and negative responses (including responses that need enhancement) as obtained from the control group participants:

Bar-graph. 1. Percentages of the control group responses to the pre-reading questionnaire.
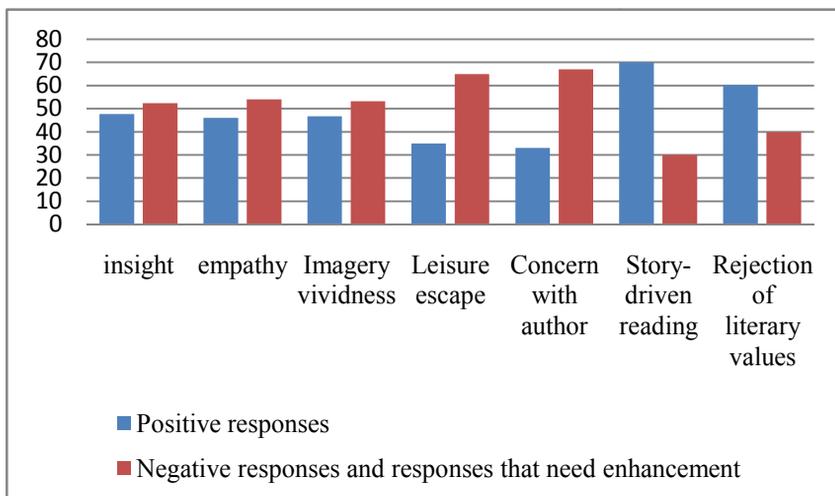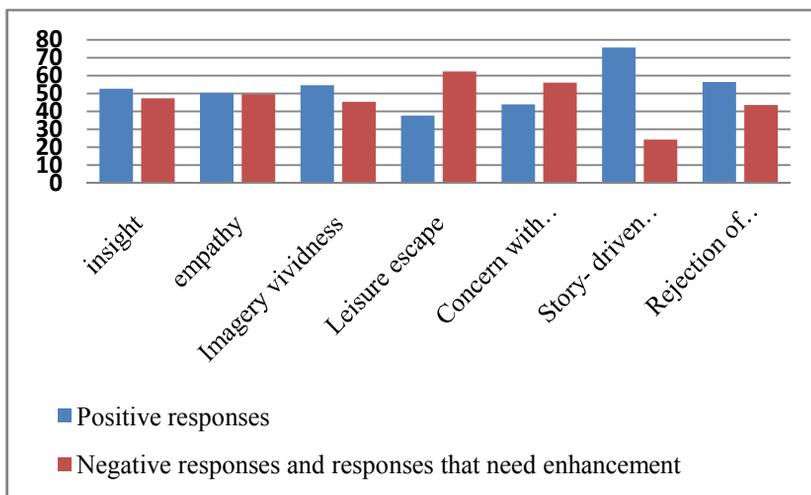
Source: Designed by the authors themselves

From the graph above, it appears that students' negative attitudes towards literature in general and fiction in particular are quite noticeable. The frequencies that the graph displays (52.33%, 53.99%, 53.25%, 65%, 67%, 30.01%, and 39.75%) must draw the attention of any literature teacher to take decisions as to the possible teaching procedures to be adopted to change these attitudes by enhancing students' level of literary response.

Interpretation of the results obtained from the experimental group does not differ from that of the control group's results. Therefore, it would be sufficiently informative to provide a general interpretation of the percentages of the experimental group responses to the pre- reading questionnaire shown in the graph below.

Bar-graph. 2. Percentages of the experimental group responses to the pre-reading questionnaire

Source: Designed by the authors themselves

From the bar-graph above, it is evident that the experimental group students have also negative attitudes towards fiction to a considerable extent (47.33%, 49.65%, 45.35%, 62.25%, 56%, 24.34%, 43.50%). It is clear that these results do not differ much from those of the control group. The results obtained in this section demonstrate that the two groups are equivalent to each other.

3.5.2 Experimental Group Reading Logs Analysis and Interpretation

The first episode of reading yielded important findings. Students' level of response is good except for "literal understanding", which means that they superficially understood some parts in the story. This can be attributed to the fact that they were still at an early stage of reading the novel and were not yet fully involved with events. Misinterpretations were few compared to the number of responses and this was a positive result. It is worth mentioning that not all the guiding questions can be answered at a particular stage of reading, some of them can be answered only after finishing reading the story. It is also important to note that answers to the guiding questions may very well change and become more elaborate and convincing as reading goes on. "Evaluation of fiction" and "recognition" levels are low because such responses can be made at a later stage when students become fully involved in the story.

The second episode of reading brought about important results. It is noticed that students' level of response improved in terms of empathy (and sympathy) and interpretation. Literal understanding was present due to narrational responses and not a

superficial understanding of events. "evaluation of fiction" and "recognition" responses remained few because of the nature of such responses and because the subjects got carried out by the story events. However, it should be noted that the presence of such responses is a positive result. During the last episodes of reading, remarkable results were noticed.

Table 2 below displays the findings obtained from the experimental group participants after finishing the last episode of reading, i.e., the twentieth, twenty first and twenty second chapters.

Table. 2. Percentages of Students' Levels of Response to Chapters 20, 21 and 22.

Response level	Number of response	Percentage
Literal understanding	72	18.79 %
Empathy (and sympathy)	152	39.68 %
Analogy (and comparison)	44	11.48 %
Interpretation	89	23.23 %
Evaluation of fiction	15	03.91 %
Recognition	11	02.87 %

Source: Designed by the authors themselves

It is clear from table 2 that the percentages of "literal understanding" and "empathy (and sympathy)" and "interpretation" are high. "analogy (and comparison)" level is 11.48% and the fifth and six levels appear with the rates 03.91% and 02.87%. The last episode of reading brought about expected results. The levels of "empathy" and "interpretation" remained high because students continued to be emotionally involved with the events and characters and showed a better ability to interpret the work. "literal understanding" continued to be present due to the fact that some students focused on the plot as events became more and more exciting. Though "evaluation of fiction" and "recognition" levels continued to be humbly present, almost all participants wrote at least one response in this regard. During the very advanced stage of the treatment phase, an important progress was made by students in terms of "understanding" , "evaluation" and " realizing the importance of literature". It can be concluded from the results that students' literary competence and response to the novel was being built up over the reading episodes as reading went on.

3.5.3 The Posttest Data Interpretation

To interpret the posttest results, the same procedure was followed. The final writing documents of participants in both experimental and control groups were evaluated according to Thomson's levels of literary response.

Table 3 below displays the findings obtained from the control group participants' final writing task that functioned as a posttest.

Table. 3. The control group posttest results (percentages of response levels).

Response level	Number of response	Percentage
Literal understanding	241	13.17 %
Empathy (and sympathy)	114	06.23 %
Analogy (and comparison)	60	03.28 %
Interpretation	148	08.09 %
Evaluation of fiction	17	00.92 %
Recognition	22	01.20 %

Source: Designed by the authors themselves

Table 3 demonstrates that most of the control group participants' responses reflect a literal understanding. The rates of the other levels of response are lower.

Table 4 below shows the results obtained from the experimental group participants' final reader response essays that were used as a posttest.

Table. 4. The experimental group posttest results (percentages of response levels).

Response level	Number of response	Percentage
Literal understanding	22	01.20 %
Empathy (and sympathy)	399	21.81 %
Analogy (and comparison)	120	06.56 %
Interpretation	330	18.04 %
Evaluation of fiction	116	06.34 %
Recognition	240	13.12 %

Source: Designed by the authors themselves

According to data in table 4, students scored well in response levels such as "empathy (and sympathy)", "interpretation" and "recognition". Lower rates were scored with regard to "analogy (and comparison)" and "evaluation of

fiction" but they are higher than those scored by the control group participants. Students also scored well in "imagery vividness" and "describing and judging characters". The lowest rates were scored for "misinterpretations", "questioning" and "vocabulary difficulty" which are positive findings. These results are the product of the participants' previous interaction with the text using the Reader Response-based guidelines.

4. Results and Discussion

To sum up, The rates of literary response elements scored by the experimental group are higher than the ones scored by the control group. This discrepancy is due to the reading logs produced by the experimental group's members who were gradually building up an aesthetic appreciation of the novel as they were reading and responding to it. Upon the analysis as well as interpretation of data gathered from different research tools used in this study, in what follows, some concluding remarks as to the overall findings obtained will be provided. The analysis and interpretation of students' pre-reading questionnaire brought about significant findings. The researcher came to the conclusion that third year LMD students at the Department of English at the University of Oran 2 have the same pattern of attitudes towards literature in general and fiction in particular. The experiment, i.e., the implementation of the Reader-Response Approach with the experimental group, culminated in significant findings. The RRA-based procedure employed by the researcher during the intervention period had a positive impact on students. They embraced it and were highly motivated. Analysis and interpretation of data gathered from students' reading logs and the posttest revealed that the

implementation of RRA increased the level of students' literary response.

5. CONCLUSION

The demands of the ever-changing globalized world require that individuals develop good reasoning and analytical skills. A spirit of interculturality is a prerequisite for a mutual understanding between nations. The overall aim of this study is to promote the teaching of literature in the Algerian classroom. It provides some remedies for the literature classroom and recommendations to improve the students' reading of fiction to the end of enlightening them on better ways of how to look at literature and their general role in an RRA-based class. If we are successful at making the best use of the Reader-Response Approach, we can make students learn from literature and reach a better understanding of themselves and the world around them.

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