

Understanding Cultural Context in Responding to Literature: Researching the Teaching of Literature in EFL/ESL Classroom Context

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Abstract

The paper shares some insights of the ideas in giving the response to literature for the students and the teachers in EFL/ESL classrooms. Understanding and appreciating a piece of literature is determined by how one can convey the concepts and words to new situations. During this process, several types of interaction happen: interaction between experience and the text; interaction between author and reader; and interaction of the reader with other readers. Life experience and the knowledge readers bring to a text play a significant role in the interpretation of the text. Cultural knowledge may also strongly affect a reader's interpretation (of the text). In order to interpret a text in the way the author has intended and to avoid the unsuccessful consequences of interpreting, readers need to develop their knowledge. Several types of responses can help readers disclose the connections and contrasts between their experience and their interpretation (of the texts). Literary "show and tell" helps readers form free associations, find contrasts, and distinguish new contexts.

Keywords: literature, response, cultural context, interaction

1. Introduction

Reading a work of literature requires a special competence since this action will involve many different aspects and/or strategies. The aspects could be varied in their practical implementation since they may interconnect with external and internal problems within an institution, students' intake, and curricular support as well. While talking about strategies for exercising the implementation will interrelate with teachers' pedagogical competence, learning materials, and classroom management. However, reading is an important skill in a language classroom. In literary based language teaching, reading is a basic competence for students to mostly engage in classroom interaction. One more important thing in reading a work of literature in ESL/EFL classroom understands the cultural context, in which the piece of work was written and produced, is a basic stepping stone to observe the overall ideas in it. This is often neglected by teachers and students in their first account in understanding a text of literature.

Even when a person does comprehend one hundred percent of the text, the inferences and interpretations involved in comprehension can produce very different insights. A housemaid character in a storybook children, Amelia Bedelia in *Amelia Bedelia* (Parish, 1963), represents how this is not so. On her first day of work, Amelia Bedelia, a maid for a rich lady, was given a list of tasks to carry out while her mistress was out. Three of the tasks were to draw the drapes, to dust the furniture, and to change the towels in the bathroom. The result of Amelia's interpretation over the command written on a piece of paper was: Amelia drew a picture of the curtains, threw dusting powder all over the room, and changed the towels by cutting them to form new shapes. She was confused when, rather than praising her artistic ability, the mistress of the house spoke harshly to her about letting the furniture fade, and was angry at the dust in the room and the changes that Amelia had made to the towels in the bathroom.

Some research dealing with understanding the contexts in literature are, but not limited, to deal with reading

ability. Reading comprehension would probably be the answer to all of the problems in making insight into the discussions on how to give response to literature. The publication by Patricia Carrell, Joanne Devine, and David Eskey, 1988; Mc Neill, 1992; Norris and Phillips, 1987; and Anderson and Wilson, 1986; Reynolds et al. (1982); Elmer, 1993; Gudykunst and Kim, 2003; Kim, 2003; Tang, 2006; Felix-Brasdefer, 2004; Howard 2010; and Aloqaili, 2012, to mention a few, have connections with reading ability and comprehension to give response to words and their contexts. Howard (2010), in a different points of view, has made several claims that students' active engagement in discussing the problems in literary works, which he coins as 'transaction with a text', will possibly drive their personal purposes and experience that lead to the construction of new, alternative voices and perspectives in giving response to literature. By this, the present paper would similarly share some ideas with Howard (2010), although there are some different opinions to reinforce.

When understanding a piece of literary work from another culture, the ability to make inferences and interpretations play an even greater role in one's insight and appreciation of the text. Not only may some of the words be unknown, but the predictions and concepts that the authors have made when writing the text may not be provided to the reader. Anyone who has lost concentration when reading and read a paragraph over and over again will recognize that passive reading is not efficient. Even if one could take in all the information in the first glance and store it in memory, it would not be enough to fully understand and appreciate a piece of work. Understanding and appreciation of a piece of work are shown by how one can convey the concepts and words to new situations.

When Johnny Five, who has the information from hundreds of books in memory, tries to help his creator to try to persuade a girlfriend to marry him, he uses many inappropriate phrases. He may have hundreds of words and sentences stored in memory, but because he does not know the context in which certain words and phrases can be used, he cannot use the words and sentences in original situations. What happen next was a message that confused the girl so much that she did not understand what the computer engineer wanted or meant to propose. It is not enough to just memorize the words when reading; to understand and appreciate literature, the reader must be able to interpret the words.

The paper shares some ideas in developing an understanding to give respond to literature. It can be systematized into some actions of teaching and learning which the teachers and the students can carry out cooperatively. The results of the discussion will mainly suggest the teachers to be more creative and innovative in giving the tasks to students, in their account to comprehend works of literature.

2. Method

The paper holds the nature of a critical review article. It seeks to develop an insight of the value of understanding the cultural context, and why it is important in giving response to literature. The paper shares some theoretical and critical arguments which have been collected from different sources to grasp the idea of researching the teaching of literature which generally adopt the nature of in-class reading. Literary classes are naturally reading based classroom, and therefore they give more assignments to students to read and to research various texts of literature. The present paper discusses some strategic patterns which can be adopted in giving response to literature in EFL/ESL classroom context. The setting of the discussion was mostly carried out in the in-class reading of literary works for students of English literature. The discussion is evaluating and interrogating the practices of reading for interpretation or reading for pleasure in literary classes.

The discussion sought to understand the practices of in-class reading which were generally done in the classrooms. Some books were reviewed and discussed to get the clearer points of discussion of the paper. The research was done by reading some books and papers which discuss the topic of understanding cultural context in most of reading classes, especially in literature based classrooms. The books or articles which were adopted to be the reading materials in the present paper are different sources which encompass the process of understanding the texts schematically. The idea was adopted from Rossenblatt, 1995; Sumara, 2002; and Howard, 2010.

The reader response method was used to see the research gaps by which it contrasts the nature of in-class reading in any kind of classroom interaction that includes literary texts as the object of discussion. It was meant to signify and to identify the process of interaction during the in-class reading task. The present paper also overviewed some publication which dealt with the project of reading based classroom (a.k.a publications by Patricia Carrell, Joanne Devine, & David Eskey, 1988; Mc Neill, 1992; Norris & Phillips, 1987; and Anderson & Wilson, 1986; Reynolds et al. (1982); Elmer, 1993; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 2003; Tang, 2006; and Felix-Brasdefer, 2004).

3. Result

How many times, after reading an English book, has a person asked a question, “Approximately how many of the words did you comprehend?” Taking this question into account is the assumption that readers or audience who discern all the words in a text will be acquainted with the entire text. Readers who accomplish something related to what they are reading, whether it is applying, analyzing, appreciating, or evaluating their interpretation to the literary text, will have a richer understanding and deeper appreciation for what they have read. The aim of this strategy is to help readers from other languages and cultures more efficiently in interpreting English literature and gaining a deeper insight of both the language and the cultural values in the pieces of literary works. This is, however, one of the constraints in understanding the historical context of a piece of work of literature (Mustofa, 2016).

When one takes an act to appreciating literature, he/she will go through several stages of interpretation. The first stage is recognition and recall. Readers, to put that in another way, will recognize the words, ideas, structure, and purpose of the text. In this stage, it is critical to think about what the author means or, like Amelia Bedelia’s case, when she does not think about it carefully in making a decision to take, the action after reading may have disastrous results. In the second stage, readers research the context; through such activities analyzing the author’s style, investigating the social issues and events of the time that the text was written, or comparing the text to other texts. It is an intertextuality competence. In the third stage, readers respond to the text; considering how to connect their own life experience to that of the literary text. During this process, several types of interaction happen: interaction between experience and the text; interaction between author and reader; and interaction of the reader with other readers. The types of interaction will be elaborated in the discussion section.

4. Discussion

4.1 Interaction Between Experience and the Text

An expanded strategic form of “The Interactive Theory to Second Language Reading” that was proposed by Patricia Carrell, Joanne Devine, and David Eskey (1988) has also been adopted in the present paper. At the time, two major theories dominated research and thought about what happens when one reads. The traditional thinkers focused on vocabulary as they described reading as figuring out the meaning of the words and putting them together to figure out the meaning of the text. Other researchers proposed that readers had their own set of ideas and experience that they recalled in order to interpret the text. Carrell and her colleagues explored how these two processes interacted with each other as readers made connections between what they believe the author said and their own experiences.

Aloqaili (2012), with respect to the above research, also investigates the nature of the relationship between reading comprehension and critical thinking. Those major theories have proposed a notion which was called schema theory. Critical thinking may be regarded as a means to activate or construct schema (Mc Neill, 1992; Norris & Phillips, 1987; and Anderson & Wilson, 1986). This is because the process of understanding a concept by making a count inference has been considered as a way to activate schemata in terms of filling in the missing connections between surface structure fragments of the text by recourse to content and knowledge about the world. Therefore, the role of experience is important in giving an interpretation.

Literature classes have been introducing students to literary concepts and literary elements as well for many years, but some students have found it somewhat difficult to fully understand the meaning. This difficulty may come from the way in which students are introduced to literature. Often they are required to take notes while the professor points out all the qualities of the text. In other way, teachers may help readers/students learn how to interpret and experience the text by themselves. Through projects and role plays based on the texts given by the teachers, students learn how to recognize connections, research contrasts, and giving respond in their own unique way to the text.

4.2 Recognizing Connections

Life experience and the knowledge readers bring to a text play a significant role in their interpretation of the text. For example, the interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* by the teenager whose parents have forbidden her to see her beloved would be quite different from that of the young bride who was able to marry the groom of her own choosing. In the same way, a British teenager who had visited Shakespeare’s house or toured a stage in which Shakespeare’s dramas had first been presented would be able to make more connections and perhaps have a deeper appreciation of the text than a college student who had never traveled beyond the borders of his/her island.

Texts about ceremonies and rituals are also more clearly understood when the reader has experienced the event

as described in the text. A study by Reynolds et al. (1982) illustrates this. The researchers gave Anglo-American and African-American students a letter written by an African-American student about a sounding. In the letter, a boy tells about a situation that occurred in the school cafeteria. After describing the exchange of insults he had with his friend, he wrote,

“We really got into it then. After a while, many people got involved--4, 5, then 6. It was a riot.”

After the gym teacher “settled things down”, the boys were sent to the principal, who expelled them for a week and called their parents.

While the Anglo-Americans had no experience with sounding, African-Americans knew it as a form of insult. African American students interpreted the event as a playful exchange of insults. Anglo-Americans assumed the letter was about a fight. Phrases like “it was a riot” and “really got into it” and the consequences of the event were consistent with “sounding,” and a physical fight. Because they lacked experience with soundings, the Anglo-Americans did not properly interpret the letter.

Although these two studies do not explore students’ interaction with literature, the principles are still true. Readers’ experience and cultural background influence their interpretation of both the words and the concepts in the text. Thus, in order to interpret a text in the way that the author intended and to avoid the disastrous consequences of interpreting like Amelia Bedelia or Johnny Five, readers need to expand their knowledge. They do this through research in which they make connections and draw contrasts with other texts and experiences (Howard, 2010).

4.3 Researching Contrasts

Effective research begins with a specific question or purpose. For readers to increase their understanding of a literary text, they need to observe decisions that the author has made not only about the content of the masterpiece, but also the technique. Active readers will examine the author’s decisions regarding word choice, the form of the text, and the use of literary devices. This is in line with the term ‘transaction’ which was introduced by Rosenblatt (1995) to define the reader-text relationship. Rosenblatt’s ideas are fundamental to reader response theory. In the same sense, Sumara (2002) asserts that engaging with literary texts can be regarded a focal practice out of which may possibly arouse deep meaning and personal understanding.

Words in English can be very tricky. When used in one situation, a word may have one meaning; in another situation, it might have an entirely different meaning. For example, when Amelia Bedelia’s employer told her to draw the drapes, she meant for her to close them. If Amelia Bedelia had been in an art class and her teacher told her to draw the drapes, it would have been appropriate for Amelia to get out a pencil and sketchpad. In literature, similar processes can confuse the reader. The same word in a 15th-century text and a 20th-century text may have different meanings. To find out if a word has changed its meaning requires research.

Authors are often very careful about the words that they use when writing. They may put words together because they sound beautiful. They may choose an easier word because of their audience. They may choose a more complex word because the subtle shades of its meaning are more accurate. A word may be chosen because of how it will make the reader feel. Word choice is more difficult to research, but one can glean a few clues about the author’s choice of words by researching the author’s purpose for writing and the intended audience. A closer examination of the genre of the work will help the reader decide if it is fiction or non-fiction. The exploration of these forms will also familiarize readers with some of the vocabulary and background knowledge that they need in order to research contrasts of various texts and their experience.

4.4 Responding to Texts

Several types of responses can help readers share the connections and contrasts between their experience and their interpretation of the literary texts. Once in a literature class, while reading of a character who had to choose between potential boyfriends, a group of students was taught the rules of an American game show, *The Dating Game*, the asked six students to play the game as if they were the characters from the book. The game made the students read the book a little more carefully

Perhaps the most natural way of communicating the interaction of the text and experience is by talking to other readers. After reading a good book, readers will often turn to their friends and ask them if they have read the book. More formal ways of structuring these experience for the classroom would be to have students interview each other or to review and give recommendations for good books for their friends. Another useful activity that can help readers think about the connections of their own experience to what they are reading is illustrations. Readers may draw pictures or find pictures to illustrate what they are reading. These illustrations may also take the form of story maps, comic strips, or home videos.

Another activity which encourages readers to think of the text more deeply is an activity which, here, can be called as “Scribal Interpreter”. In this activity, the reader revises the text by changing one of its features. This is not a new activity; movie directors have been doing it for years. For example, in the 1960’s, Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise altered the setting of the story of Romeo and Juliet from 17th century England to 20th century New York. The plot and characters of *West Side Story* are the same as those of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The producers of *West Side Story* even attempted to preserve the poetic form of the text by setting the dialog to music. An added challenge for Scribal Interpreters would be to maintain the exact meter and rhyme schemes in the text even when changing some of the words in order to match the new setting.

4.5 Interaction Between Author and Reader

If a person is truly thinking about the message in the pages he is reading and recognizes that message as coming from someone, then the first step of interaction with the author has begun. Readers who recognize that authors write with a certain purpose and are perhaps reacting to the social and cultural issues of their times will ask themselves questions while they read. For the sensitive reader of literature, the line of questions might be as follows: “What values, motivation, and priorities do I, the reader, share with the author?”; “How are we different?”; “To what extent does the author’s cultural background influence the decisions that he or she has made concerning word choice, the use of literary devices, and genre?”; and “How do these choices affect the way that I feel about the text?”.

A potential barrier to understanding literature is its age. With all but contemporary literature, the author has lived in a different era and possibly a different culture and, thus, has responded to a set of cultural and social issues that the reader’s generation has already resolved. For this reason, in order to understand the text, it becomes important to identify the values, priorities, and motivations of the author and somehow link the themes that are timeless to our own experience.

Cultural values may create a challenge in interpreting texts, especially when the author and reader are from two different cultures. An example of clashing cultural values that one might encounter while reading literature is connected to the value of the words themselves. Tang (2006) asserts that Americans place great value on words as conveyers of fact while Chinese put more emphasis on action. For Chinese, the truth is in the action, not necessarily the words. Thus, for intercultural leaders, it is not enough just to know the glosses for various words or even appropriate and inappropriate behaviors; to understand the deep meaning of culture, intercultural reader must seek out a solid understanding of the cultural implications of those behaviors.

How can intercultural readers acquire the cultural rules and values of the host community and even begin to understand the cultural implications of their behaviors? First, they must realize that theirs is not the only relevant worldview; they possess an alternative logic to that of their hosts. If they want to comprehend the cultural implications of their host’s language, intercultural readers must value, though not necessarily embrace, their host’s perspective (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 2001; Elmer, 1993).

Second, an understanding of cultural rules and values is best achieved through constant exposure. If they want to increase their understanding of the culture and their fluency in the language, intercultural readers should increase social contact with those of the host culture. One strategy that facilitates the intercultural reader’s adaptation to a new set of rules is that of seeking to see things from a different point of view (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Kim, 2001; Elmer, 1993)

Another strategy that intercultural readers can use to become familiar with cultural rules and values is to increase their contact with the culture. As the intercultural reader’s contact with the culture increases, his communication style begins to resemble that of the other culture (Felix-Brasdefer, 2004) and the distance between his culture and the culture of the author narrows. The geographical distance between Eastern readers and Western authors is great; literature offers a way to narrow that gap. When an author moves a reader to excitement or anger, for some it sparks the need to respond, particularly when reading is regarded as active communication rather than a passive activity. Some living authors have websites on which the readers might post notes. A more formal way of responding to the author is by reviewing his work and writing a criticism. The criticism would explore the writer’s technique and use of literary devices as well as respond to some of the values, goals, and themes that the author wrote about.

Another type of response, which works better with non-fiction but could still be used with fiction, poetry, or drama, is a position paper or a letter to the editor. In non-fiction, when the author’s intent is to argue against a social evil of the day, writing a letter to the editor or an essay expressing the other side of the debate has a clear form. With other forms of more creative literature, the challenge to respond to the injustices may be a little more difficult; yet writing a reaction would drive the reader to a deeper understanding of the concepts and cultural

assumptions that the author has set forth. A third type of activity that Collie and Slater (2002) suggest is “Parallel Reading”. For this activity, readers familiarize themselves with several texts that were written at roughly the same time. This helps readers understand the social, political, and cultural context.

4.6 Interaction of Reader With Other Readers

Kindergarten teachers have long relied on the activity of “Show and Tell.” In this activity, the students bring something to show to the class and tell their classmates about it. Through such an activity, kindergartens learn to socialize with other people. In literature circles, the same kind of activity, sharing a story or a poem that one has read, increases readers’ interaction with other readers and, at the same time reinforces the knowledge they have acquired and the enjoyment they have gained in their interaction with the text. Literary show and tell helps readers form connections, find contrasts, and forge new contexts.

Sharing experience with others can be very rewarding for the reader. As readers share what they have read, they begin to see more connections in the book. Through discussion with other readers, they may even see connections between events or characters that they themselves did not make on their own. The sharing also encourages connections between the readers themselves, building their relationships. Sharing a book with other readers also opens one’s mind about various contrasts that one might find in the book as well as interpretations that other readers got out of the book. For example, recently, when a person was quite befuddled by a story that has been read before, he shared the story with his colleague. He knew very little about the author other than his name. As he talked to his colleague, who had not read the story, but was familiar with the author, the information that he gave about the author and the context of the writing helped him to form another perspective on the story.

Interacting with other readers could be the most fun part of reading a text, or the most boring. When a reader was first introduced to literature, sharing books with his/her parents was exciting. Listening to a father and a mother read created a secure, happy environment. When a person was in school, some of his teachers fostered his love of reading and of literature. Reading a short, humorous play with classmates each taking different roles was enjoyable. On the other hand, discussing *Crime and Punishment* with classmates who were as disinterested in the book as this reader did not stimulate a love for literature. Writing an ending to an unfinished short story by Mark Twain and sharing it with classmates was fun. Listening to classmates’ stories was also fun. Listening to classmates give an oral report about their reading was neither fun nor interactive.

Reports about literature do not have to be passive and boring. They can be fun and interactive if the reading community is creative and engaging when organizing the forum for their presentation. For example, they might be a part of a literary conference or panel discussion where each reader analyzes and comments on a different aspect of a literary work. After their short presentation, the other readers ask questions.

One does not need to wait until everyone has read a book to interact. An interaction may start with reading. A reading community may engage in reader’s theater, an activity in which the reading circle assigns a certain part of the text to each reader. For drama, the reading parts are clearly seen. Each reader would be assigned a character. For prose, readers may still take the part of various characters; the reading circle creating reader’s theatre for this type of text just has an extra step of interpretation. In reader’s theatre, there is no acting, only reading. Acting and role play is another useful activity for bringing the reading community together while reading the literary work. Reading a text aloud, whether through reader’s theatre or dramatization is a useful tool for helping readers hear the different voices and make connections between his own experience and the ideas in the text.

Another way to create excitement in the shared experience is to engage in a collective response. Activities such as games, reader’s theatre, and dramatization form a natural base for a collective response within the reading community since a number of readers is already involved in the experience. Other activities that typically invite individual response to the text or author (e.g. illustrating a work, writing letters, writing literary critiques) could be designed as collaborative activities, thus creating a forum for a collective response. An element of competition might be added to the shared experience by choosing unbiased judges from the reading community to evaluate the interpretations and responses to the literary texts and their authors. They might evaluate certain qualities of the responses such as humor, tragedy, or romance and decide which of the responses was able to fulfill those qualities.

Literature gives students of English ample exercises in understanding the texts and the cultural contexts behind the works. Because literary works provide a variety of grammatical and lexical structures, careful readers who familiarize themselves with the nature of the language used in the works find literature a valuable tool for improving their skills in the English language. Even casual readers who pass their time enjoying a good English book will be rewarded by the effort they give to practicing and exposing themselves to English

English words have shades of meaning that change depending on the context in which they are used. As we saw in the example of Amelia Bedelia, drawing the drapes could be the same as closing the curtains or sketching the curtains depending on the intention of the speaker. The more one reads the more one can notice words in various situations used by different people for different reasons. This enriches the vocabulary mastery. Much practice reading also leads to faster reading. Plausible interpretations of words and the correct shade of meaning implied by the word are much easier to access the 100th time that a reader encounters a word that it was on the first encounter.

In addition to speeding up the recognition process and giving readers a deeper knowledge, interactive approaches to literature can develop a broader perspective of the world. Through researching authors and thinking about the text that they have written, literary scholars increase their knowledge of the historical, cultural, political, and social issues of the day. Readers can begin to draw connections between what was happening in the author's world and what the author has recorded on paper. Interacting with the text and with fellow readers about a story or poem creates more opportunities to think about the text. This, in turn, leads to greater comprehension of the text as well as a deeper knowledge of the culture in which and for which the text was written.

5. Conclusion

To summarize the overall discussions, even when someone does recognize one hundred percent of the text he reads, the intended meanings or conclusions and interpretations involved in comprehending the text can have different ideas and inferences. It can be best described that the aim of the proposed strategy is to help readers or students from other languages and cultures in terms of SLA/FLA to be more efficient in interpreting English literature and gaining a deeper appreciation of both the language and the cultural values in it. In the meantime, the proposed ideas can only be carried out when there is a synergy between teacher's creativity and students' active participation in the whole process.

The strategy which covers recognition and recall; readers research the context, through such activities the students are analyzing the author's style, investigating the social issues and events of the time that it was written, or comparing the text to other texts; readers respond to the text, to the extent that the students are considering how to connect their own life experience to that of the literary text has also been determined. During the process, several types of interaction happen interaction between experience and the text; interaction between author and reader; and interaction of the reader with other readers, by which these two processes interacted with each other as readers made connections between what they believe the author said and their own experiences.

It should also be taken into account that background knowledge and vocabulary will involve not only the ideas that the students may find in the text but also literary words and concepts to describe the form and style of the text they have to read. Through projects and role plays based on the literary texts, students learn how to recognize connections, research contrasts, and respond in their own unique way to the text. Life experience and the knowledge readers bring to a text play a significant role in their interpretation of the text. Perhaps the most natural way of communicating the interaction of the text and experience is by sharing or telling it to other readers. Thus, the teachers and the students who practice reading English literature are also going to have these abilities in developing their communicative knowledge in giving response to contextual issues in the texts they are reading, since they have been able to recognizing the words and ideas, spending time in reflection about the author's message and purpose, and responding publically to the texts they have read which may assist them to have more expectations on faster word recognition, deeper knowledge of the world, a broader perspective of the world, and richer relationships in making sense of contextual features the text probably has.

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