

# A Review on Reader Response Approach to Teaching Literature at EFL Contexts

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Received: June 1, 2020

Accepted: June 26, 2020

Online Published: June 28, 2020

doi: 10.5539/elt.v13n7p118

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v13n7p118>

## Abstract

The review explores the philosophical basis of the application of Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory (RRT) to teach reading-to write of literary works in practical senses in EFL contexts across borders. Grounded in the integration of paradigm shift from text- to reader-oriented, critical pedagogy and literacy, and socio-constructivism, reader response-based teaching pedagogy places learners among the active meaning makers as members of a democratic classroom community while getting immersed in critical reading-writing (literacy) events. Moreover, this critical review highlights the possible classroom practices as framed by RRT principles that offer freedom and enjoyment in reading literary works to face the sophistication of varied modern 21<sup>st</sup> century educational web-based platforms that lead to the use of e-response journal and e-literature circles by means of e-peer-reviewing. Drawing on the current technology-enriched teaching media, RRT application is expected to benefit most EFL learners in gauging literature-based literacy development to sensitize their intercultural communication across global contexts. Moreover, recommended practical trends of RRT principles are presented in this review.

**Keywords:** reader response theory, journal, literacy, critical pedagogy, e- learning

## 1. Introduction

The role of teacher in designing meaningful classroom dynamics is central to the realm of literature teaching pedagogy. The teachers' decision to approach to choosing classroom teaching strategy is empirically influential to students' stances and engagement in cultivating their own reading-writing event. Plethora of studies (e.g. Many & Wiseman, 1991; Wiseman & Many, 1992; Cushing, 2018) confirmed that the shifted paradigm from reader- to text oriented that the teachers and educators had focused on empirically affected the students' active participation in (re)making meaning and interpreting texts. Reader-based teaching has originally been inspired by Rosenblatt's (1997, 1990, 2005) Reader Response Theory (RRT) as mostly discussed in literary theories and criticism areas. RRT pedagogically promotes learners' (as active readers) freedom, enjoyment, and engagement in reading texts and literary works usually illuminated by such critical and emotionally personal responses triggered by teacher/instructor's guiding questions and tasks. The trendy reader response-based teaching allows students/learners to democratically and collaboratively share ideas and feelings after reading process through extensive reading designed to attain readers' utmost lived through experience of reading. The reader's self-directed learning is consequently promoted to academically get success in achieving general standpoint of schooling.

It was John Dewey's idea concerning democratic shaping process in literature pedagogy that instilled Rosenblatt's RRT development to corroborate an effort of constructing a democratic classroom by which students or learners likely get immersed in getting meanings of the texts assigned (see Connell, 1996, 2005, 2008). Students in the classroom deserve the equal and powerful chances to self-develop their potentials through

well-planned courses in order that the more open rooms are provided with in nonthreatening atmospheres. By so doing, students will posit themselves as active agents of (re)constructing and (re)making new things and meanings of any text being engaged. Furthermore, grounded in Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic perspectives, RRT potentially enables learners to develop expressive utterances as reader responses to texts (see Middendorf, 1992). That premise implies that learners can self-direct learning how to create new meanings through constructing new texts. Consequently, reader response production demands learners to actualize their own intellectual and personal capacities.

Under the response-based pedagogy the integration of reading and writing can be meaningfully developed in literature project that possibly entails readers' engaging with texts and connecting their life experiences and world views. The trend of RRT likely leads to the practicality and usefulness of reader response journal (RRJ) since it potentially embraces individual intellectual and emotional capacities in written modes to manifest their comprehensive perspectives as they have lived through. Apart from the triumph of research directions of the RRJ use that has awakened the educators and researchers in both English speaking countries such as in the US (see Wilhelm, 2016) and EFL contents across countries (see Nafisah, 2014; Carlisle, 2000; Sanchez, 2009) to pay more attentions and endeavors to improve their teaching outcomes, criticisms on the shortcomings and pitfalls of RRT are also still addressed to its limitedness on the relevance aspects of readers' socio-cultures associated with freedom in speech and explicit talk habits among Asian EFL learners. Relevant studies have questioned, proved, and emphasized the credibility and the power of RRT-spirited RRJ to pedagogically cater for students' needs and interests in enjoying reading texts in the target language (e.g. Carlisle, 2000; Spirovska, 2019). Yet, critical review on the application of RRT and RRJ is still rare. Thus, this review is intended to help educators and language teachers get theoretical benefits to improve their teaching quality.

## **2. Theorizing Reader Response Theory (RRT) from Multiple Perspectives**

### *2.1 The Conceptual Notion of RRT*

Originated from literary theory and critical theory (literary criticism) issue (Sinha, 2009) and initiated from Rosenblatt's speculation on the Dewey's democratic education (Connell, 2000, 2008), RRT 'remains relevant for cotemporary educators' (Connell, 2000, p. 28), and is called transactional theory (Connell, 2008). Though in several decades RRT has not been popular among scholars, its framework is recently used across contexts of language educations. RRT was first introduced by J Richards, as one of predecessors (Rosenblatt, 1978), as response to the idea of teaching reading that promoted structure-oriented views on reading text. As developed in the area of literary criticism and critical theory, Rosenblatt's RRT was gradually acknowledged for its powerful influences to the success of teaching reading (e.g. Kelly, Farnan, & Richardson, 1996; Langer, 1996; Lewis, 2000, 2020). The notion 'response' in this perspective refers to both intellectual and emotional reactions towards the texts being interpreted. In response-based approach, it is believed that readers of literature transact their ideas and lived through experiences of reading with the texts. While engaging and transacting with texts, readers try to manifest their self-actualization in cultivating interpretive capacities and fund of knowledge to make sense of the interpretation process and results.

RRT application in the well- and balanced classroom program allows students to have freedom and optimal chances to express their voices. Ideally, as Rosenblatt strongly advocates, transacting process of texts in more nonthreatening atmosphere can possibly nurture democratic participation (Raines, 2005). Democratization in the classroom setting is of course sensitized in the process of respecting others' different opinions in terms of literacy events as triggered by classroom discussion (Kosnoski, 2005). As literacy is shaped as social practice (Luke, 1991), collaboration and cooperation in (re)making and (re)constructing (new) meanings play important essences in response-based pedagogy (Wood, Roser & Martinez, 2002). The direction of reading class that promotes collaborative reading also echoes the very basic personal relationships while reading and interpreting process, which is another educational benefit beyond the teaching (Watkins, 2020).

Readers' role in reading-writing events seems to be very meaningful in (re)constructing and (re)making meaning after getting involved in interpreting the texts assigned. 'Transacting' means a process that empower readers to self-actualize text-meaning construction in the framework of cognitive and metacognitive as well as socio-affective nurturing process. When readers focus on the text-investigation, the strategy of 'efferent' is used, while readers try to involve their emotional and personal accounts, 'aesthetic' stance is used (Rosenblatt, 1978). Aesthetic reading in the modern era is demanded to make readers human and able to humanize surroundings that instill social justice (see Smith, 2017). The application of aesthetic reading by means of RRT across contexts indicates multilayered merits with reference to certain contexts: in Asian contexts (Carlisle, 2000; Nafisah, 2014; Zainal et al, 20) and across borders like Argentina (Sanzhes, 2009).

RRT-based project in reading-writing literary works generally results in creative responses that represent readers' intellectual and emotional accounts. Research suggests, though still limited to its diversity, some models of assessing its dimensions. Empirically, studies on dimensions and predictions of literary response tend to embrace such psychological reactions like emotional indications: interests, anger, happiness, sadness, courage, and jealousy (e.g. van Schooten, Oostdam, & de Gloppe, 2001). Yet, owing to the assessment of RRT productions and outcomes, its concept and practical accounts are still problematic. The assessment problems likely emerge due to the learners' diversity in linguistic backgrounds and varied creativities (Schmidt, 2013) that will allow more interpretive possibilities. It implies that more attentions and empirical efforts should be paid to help situate RRT application into compatible pedagogical areas to emphasize that response-based teaching not only offers challenging alternative of teaching but also proves effective ways-out of encouraging language learners to be active meaning makers.

## 2.2 Socio-constructivism Views

Learners' sensitivity of collaboration and cooperation as demanded in educational empowerment to shape classroom community that is enacted by RRT application should be taken into consideration by the teachers in designing reading courses. In this sense, regarding the emergence of the Vygotsky's socio-constructivism views, Holzman (2008) promotes peer-feed-backing process of learners' (readers') written responses as expressed in RRJ project. Scaffolding then occurs when the learners share constructive inputs or revisions to their works through ongoing drafting of the journal writing (see also Donato, 2000). In reader-response approach to teaching, scaffolding means to be a very influential strategy in the process of guiding the steps (Rashtchi, 2019; Reynolds, 2017) by which the students get chances to be guided to gradually be tapped into activities of voicing ideas in more meaningful classroom interaction.

## 2.3 Critical Pedagogy and Literacy

The critical classroom dynamics will consequently encourage the classroom members to feel safe to express their voices. At the same time that driving classroom force can improve their target language in the perspectives of critical literacy (e.g Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014; Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016), considered as an empowerment of students, which implicitly corresponds to Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy. In this way, critical literacy "promotes textual engagement that emphasizes consuming (reading, listening, viewing), producing (writing, speaking, designing), and distributing texts for real-life purposes and audiences" (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014, p. 123). Thus, philosophically speaking, the interplay of critical literacy and critical pedagogy strongly boosts the pedagogy of literature teaching that promotes reading-writing (literacy) activities.

## 3. Possible and Alternative Response Projects

### 3.1 Online or e-RRJ: Connecting Reading-Writing through Multimedia

Reader response journals play important window in fostering various perspectives (Shin, 2019). Integration of essential skills, reading-speaking-writing-displaying provokes synergy of learners' using intellectual and emotional capacities as to facilitate aesthetic reading that result in creative works. Empirical evidences suggest that integrated literacy event has echoed the mainstream literature and literacy pedagogy. Genlott & Gronlund (2013) support their research finding implying that the integration of both skills in one course of language program led to the positive benefits for the readers. This spirit also corroborates the practices of Reader Response Theory (RRT). Considering the importance of RRT application at most levels of education, the necessity of introducing RRT-based teaching is then central to the realm of EFL literature education.

Pedagogically, RRJ potentially encourages readers as writers to freely and enjoyably express their personal and critical reflections including wants, interests, ideas and thoughts, and other personal reflections (Flitterman-King, 1988; Fulps & Young, 1991) that originally represent readers' language capacity. Other studies also suggest the significances of the use of RRT (Dreyfuss & Barilla, 2005; Liang, 2011). Parallel to those previous studies, Zainal et al. (2010) also affirm that the use of RRJ also indicated significantly positive effects on their students' personal accounts and linguistic growths. Thus, the use of RRJ offers EFL students personal, linguistic, academic, and pedagogic significances (Garson & Castaneda-Pena, 2015; Harfitt & Chu, 2011; Sanchez, 2009).

Online and web-based RRT application through using RRJ has empirically issued with the extent to more attention to new media literacy. E-response journal was empirically introduced by Larson (2007) to examine how integration of technology supports the emergence of new literacies within electronic reading process. The popularity of the electronic journaling project has much influenced e-RRJ in literature instruction. E-RRJ facilitates learners to engage in more challenging and creative interactions (e.g. Larson, 2007, 2009). E-reader response trends have evoked learners' multiple literacies and intercultural sensitivity while cultivating

e-interaction. Studies on the use of e-journaling (e.g. Lee, 2012) reveal that e-peer-reviewing can also energize learners in producing such creative works as reader response journals with illustrative images and posters, or other artistic written forms and digital arts. The benefits of e-journals potentially are subject to learners' involvement in media community. For EFL learners, the demand to self-direct learning under web-based response pedagogy is indeed dependent on teachers' decisions to approach to catering for students' needs and interests in reading and writing project so as to promote successful autonomous learning of the target language as affected by more creatively engaging learning process.

### *3.2 E-Literature Circles: Suggested Possible Model*

Literature circles (LCs), apart from other response activities that likely triggers students' active involvements in reading, deserve our attention to activate EFL learners' participation. Daniels's (1994, 2002, 2006) provocations on the use of peer-led discussion to collaboratively interpret texts lead to the growing interests in researching and applying LCs for varied purposes in the field of reading-writing across levels of education (Kim, 2003; Thomas & Kim, 2019). On the basis of different group jobs, learners fulfill their own responsibility (e.g. discussion director, connector, vocabulary enricher, literary luminary, summarizer, illustrator, and checker/travel tracer) to take parts in interpreting the assigned text. The peer-led discussion allows each member to interact and talk about their own responses and reactions toward the texts.

E-LCs basically demands the learners as active readers to get immersed in the virtual worlds with social engagement and socialization in the perspective of multicultural contexts as indicated by varied community backgrounds. In more private condition, learners as active readers have more rooms to self-direct their own space to engage reading process. Being facilitated by multi-literacies, e-readers will try to self-direct learning to communicate as much as possible while expressing their original ideas in group discussion. Moreover, they freely take and give responses to their peers and take high risks in expressing critical responses.

A teacher can design the courses of LCs in the more practical sequences. Firstly, the teacher prepares and determines the profile of class to be taught: grade, estimated time (allotment). Secondly, she/he can plan the lesson by including student objectives, and description of each session. In more practical senses, LCs program can be implemented through a six-step sequence as suggested in Read-Write-Think project (NCTE/IRA, 2006): 1. Students choose one of valuable texts they have enjoyed most; 2. The teacher can let students arrange class in literature circle group; 3. At the first meeting, the teacher should let students decide how much of the text to read and which role each of them will fill during the meeting, make sure that they have a copy of the correct role sheet, and read their text and prepare for literature circle meetings; 4. Following LCs meetings (and repeating until the text is finished), students should use written or drawn notes to guide the group's reading and discussion (according to their role they are filling for the session), be open and make sure that everyone has a chance to participate, remember that personal stories that connect to the reading and open-ended question about the text are welcome, decide how much of the text to read and rotate the roles that each of them will fill during the next meeting, make sure that they have a copy of the correct role sheet, and read their text and prepare for the next literature circle meeting; and 5. When books are finished, the students as readers can share their responses with their classmates, and then with new groups form around new reading choices. To support the project, each individual student (reader) is invited to write their reader response journal that includes their intellectual and emotional response to be next shared with their small group and peer-reviewed. The suggested six-step procedures of the sample model exemplify the applicable ones that can likely cater for the EFL learners' engagement in reading, discussing, sharing, and writing responses. Yet, teachers' adaptation to the context, age level, and linguistic experiences is very crucial. The more flexible model can also be developed in the framework of the integration of RRT principles, critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and socio-constructivism as well as learners' psychological, social, and cultural backgrounds.

## **4. Conclusions**

The likelihood of practicing reader-response based teaching of literature at both English speaking countries and EFL contexts seems to be conceptually and empirically evident. Through varied empowering teaching strategies that should be adjusted to pedagogical principles and negotiated with students' needs and interest as well as level of education, the classroom practices of response-based teaching can be designed under the consideration of critical pedagogy and literacy that cater for students' nonthreatening atmosphere and secure feeling so that each student or learner has more rooms to express ideas and responses in collaborative engagement. The suggested modes, Reader Response Journal (RRJ) and Literature Circles (LCs) through online or web-based media, deserve important privileges to attract EFL teachers and language educators to make response-based teaching fruitful. By integrating RRJ with LCs, the teaching of literary texts can pedagogically encourage (EFL) learners

with diverse backgrounds to enthusiastically express what they want and need to say to interpret the texts assigned, which is in line with Rosenblatt's RRT principles. Apart from its pitfalls and shortcomings in its compatible assessments of reader response production, response-based teaching still remains applicable and adjustable to the current educational framework. In practice, yet, teachers' or instructors' scaffolding technique is needed in the teaching process to gradually build and improve learners' motivation in reading texts written in their target language (English).

### Acknowledgement

The authors are thankful to Prof Mursid Saleh, PhD, an Applied Linguist from UNNES, Semarang, Indonesia, for his very constructive insights so this review seems fruitful in terms of extensive implications for (English) language education across contexts.

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