READER RESPONSE JOURNALS IN THE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY WORKS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of reader response journals in the analysis of literary works among Malaysian TESL undergraduate students. The study employs mixed method approach and addresses a research question, ‘What are Malaysian TESL undergraduate students’ perceptions on the use of reader response journals in the analysis of literary works?’ Six students of moderate competency in the English language were selected for an interview session to investigate participants’ perceptions of the reader response journals in poem analysis. Interview data were analysed by using thematic analysis in identifying the emerging themes. The findings revealed an increase in aesthetic stance in students’ literary analysis. Besides, students shared that their analyses were more critical with the help of reader response journals. This study proposes an alternative method and strategy to learn literature aesthetically.

Keywords: reader response journal, transactional, literature, schema, aesthetic stance.

INTRODUCTION
Reader response journals have continually been discussed and conducted in the teaching and learning of literature. However, there has been less focus on its use in the Malaysian context, so this study hopes to conduct its effectiveness of use by among Malaysian TESL students to aid them to think critically through their personal experiences to

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respond to a literary text. Reader response journals are a method based on the reader response theory. A theory which arose to popularity around the 1930s as a move away from New Criticism, focusing on the form of a literary work, and instead on the reader’s response to a literary work. The theory was developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1991) who views reading as a transactional process between the reader and the literary text.

In this process, the reader will use their own schemata or past experiences to create meaning from a text (Iskhak et al., 2017). This theory was then further expanded by other scholars such as Noran Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Robert Jauss. Fulps and Young (1991) state that reader response journals bring many positive impacts towards the students such as developing “comprehension, knowledge of literature and their ability to communicate and refine ideas”. A study conducted by Shin (2019) examines the use of reader response journals of an English L2 learner, 18-year-old Hyun, when reading two literary works regarding historical moments of Japanese history. Hyun’s Korean background has imbued him with how he views the relationship between Korea and Japan which shows in his responses in the journal with Japan as the evil one while Korea is the innocent victim. However, towards the end of the research period, Shin finds that Hyun begins to sympathise with the characters in the story as they have also suffered from the war. Hyun still maintains his view of the Japanese as “bad/cruel”, but he can “recognize the logical fallacy of generalizing all Japanese people as “brutal and crazy””. Hyun’s responses show that he begins to go back and forth on his stances, indicating his cognitive ability to think critically regarding literary works by relating to his own schemata.

McIntosh (2010) conducted a study where she studied the implementation process of reader response journals by novice teachers and their reflection implementation. The findings of the study show that with consistent guidance and affirmations from the teacher with the journals, the students showed a positive impact in their responses over time. The students managed to become more “articulate with their ideas” (McIntosh, 2010). The journals enabled the students to create a more personal connection with the literary works assigned to them and generate interest among them. The novice teachers also find that the more relatable the literary work is, the more personal responses they garner from the students.
A Malaysian study by ZainorIzat Zainal et al., (2010) examines the use of literary journals (reader response journals) to motivate students in interacting with literary texts as well as to develop critical appreciation for the texts. The findings indicated that the undergraduates preferred journals to respond to texts as they are able to create their own meaning and also obtain high marks for their course. However, when analysing the data, the researchers find that reflexive statements, associating their schemata with the text, were the lowest among others. Hence, the need to focus on reader response in literature. Based on studies conducted on reader response pedagogy and reader response journals, there is a gap in its use among Malaysian TESL undergraduate students. Most studies that have been conducted are from abroad so the context may differ with the local students of Malaysia. Although there has been researched done on its use with Malaysian TESL undergraduates, its use in facilitating critical thinking has not been studied enough. Overall, the research gap needs to be addressed and determine whether reader-response journals are able to aid Malaysian TESL students to generate critical responses towards literary works by relating to their prior knowledge or experiences.

The problem arose when the researcher was conducting a microteaching lesson with her classmates. During the lesson, the students were tasked to respond to a poem and explain why they think the poet used certain stylistic elements. Based on the student’s responses, quite a number of them did not tap into their schemata to respond critically to the task. They mostly described what they saw in the poem and did not use prior knowledge to evaluate the poem.

According to Atek (2020), the findings show that the personal-response approach is the least favourable approach among the students with a mean of 3.65. In comparison to other approaches, such as moral-philosophical and information-based with a mean of 4.13 and 3.90 respectively. This indicates the common practice of teachers’ and students’ tendency to focus on more efferent reading than aesthetic reading. This is further supported by Blachowicz and Ogle (2017, as cited in Yahya Omar, 2017) stating that much focus is directed to the content of literary works and preparation for exams instead of allowing students to develop personal connections with the works.

Elsewhere, Yahya Omar (2017) also states that students find it difficult to understand or obtain the author’s message and they struggle in finding the meaning beyond the literal meaning in the literary works.
This could indicate that not much practice has been done during lessons to enable students to develop the necessary skills.

In order to overcome the issues stated previously, there have been many activities suggested to create the opportunity for students to make a personal connection with literary works. Some examples of these activities are discussions, brainstorming and journal writing. For this study, reader response journals have been selected as the activity to overcome the issue as it has shown positive impacts when implemented and that it can aid students to make those connections to literary works in a natural way (McIntosh, 2010).

The research question of the present study is ‘What are Malaysian TESL undergraduate students’ perceptions on the use of reader response journals in the analysis of literary works?’

LITERATURE REVIEW

Include the current knowledge including substantive findings, as well as theoretical and methodological contributions to your topic. A literature review surveys books, scholarly articles, and any other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, and by so doing, provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works in relation to the research problem being investigated.

Definition of Literature

Literature is defined as “a body of written works [which] has traditionally been applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose distinguished by the intentions of their authors and the perceived aesthetic excellence of their execution.” (Rexroth, 2020). In Malaysia, the education of literature in universities and schools all have the same goal of forming empathetic and holistic students, who are not only tolerant of others’ cultures but also able to analyse messages in literary texts presented and improve their English proficiency.

Probst (1994) listed the six goals of the literature program in the English curriculum whereby act as a guide to developing a curriculum meant to nurture their passion for reading and relate to themselves in the process. The six goals are:
I. Students will learn about themselves.
II. Students will learn about others.
III. Students will learn about cultures and societies, their varying concepts of the good life, of love and hate, justice and revenge, and the other significant issues of human experience.

IV. Students learn how texts operate, how they shape our thought and manipulate our emotion.

V. Students should learn how context shapes meaning.

VI. Students should learn about the processes by which they make meaning out of literary texts.

Schema in Reading

Schema, plural: schemata, is defined as the background knowledge of an individual which they obtained before from a past learning experience. Cook (1997, as cited in Cho & Ma, 2020) states that schema is the “mental preparation of a typical instance which helps people to make sense of the world more quickly because people assimilate new experiences by activating relevant schema in their minds” [8]. The word ‘schema’ was initially used in psychology by Barlett (1932) as “an organization of past reactions or experiences” (1932, as cited in An, 2013) but was later used in the studies of reading comprehension around the 1980s. The background knowledge of each individual has actually aided them in finding the meaning and making sense of new knowledge that they read in a text.

The schema in Literature Learning

In the education area, especially in the teaching of literature, many teachers have relied on the use of schema activation methods to aid students’ reading comprehension. Usman et al. (2021) state that during the analysis of the text, students actually refer to their prior knowledge along with their linguistic background to comprehend the words and meaning in the text as there are those similar to their own cultural and social backgrounds. In a study by Haifa Almufayrij (2020) the findings show that students when exposed to pre-reading activities, which activated their schemata, were they able to comprehend the literary texts better than prior to it.

Reader Response Theory in the Analysis of Literary Texts

One approach which enables teachers to achieve the goals set by Probst is using the reader response approach derived from the reader response theory. The theory was developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1938) and expanded on Schema Theory. She states that in order for
readers to create meaning from the text, they need to rely on their background knowledge to make connections with the content of a literary text. This is further supported by An (2013) who states that a text “does not carry meaning by itself” but rather acts as a guide for readers on how they would construct meaning from their own background knowledge. Reader response theory development made a shift from the traditional method of literary analysis of mainly finding meaning solely from the text to a more reader focus response and interaction with the text. She describes this relationship between the text and the reader as transactional where the reader makes the connection between the text and their experiences. She also introduced the efferent-aesthetic continuum which highlights the two types of responses that readers make when they have read a text. In simple terms, the efferent response is where the readers will extract information from the text while an aesthetic response is from the readers’ experience with the text.

It is important to note that every reader comes from different cultural backgrounds which influence their responses, making them vary from one another. This is supported by Wolfgang Iser (2014) as he also states that meanings or perspectives of a literary text, although be different from one reader to another, but most often respond to similar conclusions (Habib, 2005). He also expanded on her theory by stating that readers, when reading a text are often confronted with ‘gaps’. These gaps are “unwritten implications or frustrated expectations in the text” (Habib, 2005) which the reader will identify as inconsistencies of the text so they will attempt to make it coherent by filling these gaps. He states that a reader’s perceptions and expectations will change over time as they continue reading a literary text such as a novel with the arise of specific plots and characters. The gaps that occur in between reading will cause the readers to think critically about these new advancements and come up with new connections as well as new meanings while referring to their schemata.

Reader Response Journals in Aiding Critical Analysis of Literary Texts

Critical thinking according to Ruggiero (1988, as cited in Esplugas & Landwehr, 1996) is where any mental activity that helps formulate or solve a problem, make a decision or fulfil a desire; it is a search for answers, a reaching for meaning. In sum, it is the cognitive process where students are actively engaged in reading to find and
determine meaning. Critical thinking is relatively new to Malaysian education, especially in the tertiary level but has shown much need for improvement. A study conducted by Kaur (2013) shows that 87.5% of the 25 students are not critical readers and that they require more training to improve their critical thinking. Besides that, the researcher also finds that her students showed they had trouble in connecting with their prior knowledge to answer given tasks. Thus, there is a need to find methods and strategies to hone in improving critical thinking among tertiary students. For this study, the researcher has chosen reader response journals as the strategy to help students analyse literary works.

Reader response journals are journals which gives students the opportunity to respond and interpret their reading personally (Fulps & Young, 1991). These journals can come in many forms such as a physical journal and a digital document which students type their responses in. In an article written by Fulps and Young (1991) titled The What, Why, When and How of Reading Response Journals, they listed the requirements of a reader response journal and how to use the journal to help students respond to literary texts. They state that a journal essentially has three elements:

I. Design - It can be a notebook, a few pages stapled together and even in digital form.

II. Format - The format of the writing in the journal is mostly informal as the goal is for the students to respond to the text in a personal and private way. The students can write a short paragraph to multiple-page entries.

III. Content - The content of the entry usually has the date, title and author of the text the students are analysing. The teachers can give prompts and guidance to help students with their responses as well as provide constructive feedback. The teacher must keep in mind that they should not give too much input to the students otherwise the responses are not authentic.

It is important to note that, the format, content and design of a journal is very much flexible as the students and teacher can customize it according to the purpose of their lesson. The responses of the students can be done in the form of diagrams, drawings, essays and in other forms of literary texts such as poems.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative data of this study was obtained through the interview session with 6 students after five class sessions on using reader response journals to analyse literary texts. The interview sessions explored students’ perceptions of the use of reader response journals to respond critically to literary texts. The responses to the questions are transcribed and then analysed through thematic analysis to identify the patterns in the students’ responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The qualitative data collection and analysis aims to answer the research question: ‘What are Malaysian TESL undergraduate students’ perceptions on the use of reader response journals in the analysis of literary works?’

Students’ perception on the use of reader response journals

In order to identify students’ perspectives on reader response journals, the researcher developed four interview questions. The interview session was conducted as a group and through Google Meet. The interview session went smoothly despite the unstable internet connection experienced by a student or two. Below are the questions and answers provided by the students.

Q1: Have you ever heard of reader response journals before this?

All answered the same which are they never have heard of such a method. The following is an excerpt from the transcription of the interview:

Ivy: No, no.
R: Alright, anyone else?
Irene: No
Bella: No
Sheila: Same miss no.

One student even shared that this was her first exposure to reader response journal and was actually surprised it exists for the learning of literature.
Reader response journals in the analysis of literary works among undergraduate students (T. E. M. Lee, & R. Gopal)

Yes, of course because um since this is my first time I am exposed about this reader response journal and I’m actually um surprised we have such thing that we can use in literature.

Hence, the common theme identified was ‘zero prior exposure’ indicating that the students never received any form of exposure prior to the research study in their course as TESL undergraduate students and in their schooling years.

**Q2: What are your opinions of reader response journals after using them in writing your analysis of the poem?**

The researcher aims to know what the students think of reader response journals when using them for their analysis of the poems throughout the five lessons conducted in the past two weeks. Firstly, some students shared that it was an interesting and useful method in writing their analysis. The students, Irene, Nur and Ivy shared this same views that it is an interesting method to help them to read as well as understand the poems taught.

**Irene:** Okay. So, my opinion is that I find it interesting the reader response journals, because it allows me to read the poem while trying to process the message of the story that is portrayed by the author.

**Ivy:** Uh okay for me, I think reader response journals are very interesting method to make the learners understand a literary work.

Nur shared that the reader response journal was interesting and fun to use as it helped her to express her opinions and thoughts on the poems in words.

**Uh for me, I think it’s very interesting and fun because firstly, it helps me in expressing my opinion uh helps me how to put my words- my thoughts into words.**
When it comes to its usefulness in helping them to understand the themes and messages conveyed in the poems, they state that it acts as an outlet to express their opinions easily and feels more personal as if writing a diary.

Sheila: Okay, sorry. okay so for me, I feel like the uh reader response journals are a very good medium for us to analyze the poems that were presented to us. And I feel like the response it is more personal. And I am allowed to write whatever comes to my mind without uh being afraid that I might be wrong about my analysis.

R: Okay, so in a way, you describe it as if you were writing a diary? Is that what you mean?

Sheila: Yes, miss.

Another student, Jennifer, even shared that using reader response journals can actually have the potential for the teaching and learning process of literature due to its nature of relating students’ life experiences to the poem.

So I guess it kind of enriches the learning process, and learning and um teaching process. Yeah, something like that.

Thus, the common theme that emerged from the second interview question is that reader response journals are ‘interesting and useful’ for the students in writing their analysis of literary works.

Q3: Do you think it was effective in helping you to respond critically to the poem?

The students agreed that reader response journals were effective in helping them to respond critically to the poems. The students shared that when it comes to analysing poems from their past experiences, it was difficult to do so as some works were, in their opinion, too complex. It was only through the use of reader response journals that were they able to better understand the meanings in the poems and
Reader response journals in the analysis of literary works among undergraduate students (T. E. M. Lee, & R. Gopal)

relate them to their own lives. This was clearly seen in Bella’s response to the question:

So yes, I agree. Because, sometimes, uh to understand a poem, I do have difficulties going through the poem line by line to understand stanza by stanza. Because sometimes the meaning of the poem is not direct. So uh using the reader response journal, I think it gives me the chance to truly understand the poem and to respond critically to the poem because as once again, is to relate to our real life.

Irene also shared how effective reader response journals were in helping her to think critically and that they can be helpful to other students as well when analysing literary works.

me to respond critically to the poem because it encourages the readers of the poems to expand their knowledge about the topics presented. And the social issues which arise and possibly familiar to the readers as well. And the readers can think and write critically um in their reader response journals by properly understanding the content and providing relatable examples from their own personal experiences.

Another issue that arose during the interview for this question was what Sheila mentioned. She believes that if it were not for the researchers’ feedback in between the lessons to her responses, she would not have been able to critically respond to the poems as she thought she could have. This was seen in the following lines:

For me, I fully agree with the answers stated earlier. Just to add on that, I feel like I wouldn't be responding um critically to a poem if I'm not um. If I'm not doing it in the way that you actually taught us miss because I get to relate to my personal experience.
This information can be used to have further research to understand how the impact of teacher feedback actually aids students in producing critical responses. Overall, the common theme for this question is that reader response journals are ‘effective’ in helping students to respond critically and ‘encourage’ to use personal experiences to make meaning of literary works.

**Q4: Were you able to connect with the text when writing in the reader response journals, such as through your own experiences?**

The students were asked if they were able to connect to the poems in the lessons with the use of reader-response journals. The researcher added that they are allowed to use their own responses that they made in the lessons as examples when sharing their answers. All students shared positive responses, stating that they were able to connect with the poems taught in the lessons and even managed to relate to their own life experiences. Three students, Bella, Nur and Jennifer shared that they related the poems from lessons two and three to their own family members in their journal entries. Bella shared that the loss of a loved one experienced by the persona’s uncle in the poem *Old Love* affected her as she too had witnessed her own grandmother’s experience of the loss of her husband.

    So it hit me personally, because um I actually have seen it in real life from my grandparents. It may not happen to me yet, but I've seen it like how my um grandmother was like, quite, I mean, very sad after my grandfather's passing, and then she was like, quite. Um I mean, it took her a while to actually adapt to the loss of her love of her life, I would say.

    Both students, Nur and Jennifer, related to the immense love portrayed in the poems *Old Love* and *I loved you first, but afterwards your love* respectively. Nur shared that she wishes one day she may be able to experience a deep love, such as the undying love of the uncle in the poem as well as the love shared between her parents.

    Which reminded me of my parents’ relationship with each other. And that makes me wonder where my own relationship will be going. If I ever have one. You know one partner? [laughs]
Reader response journals in the analysis of literary works among undergraduate students (T. E. M. Lee, & R. Gopal)

Jennifer shared that she related the love of the persona with her partner to that of her parents' relationship.

*kind of um put together like, my own experiences, like seeing my parents and be able to relate to the love that was expressed in the poem? And since in the poem is it talks about, like, love between the two person*

The other students shared that they managed to compare the poems’ contents to their own lives as well as social issues which they face. The student, Ivy, shared that when it comes to the poem, *Phenomenal Woman*, she felt that she was affected in a positive way by the message in the poem about her self-confidence.

*Like one of the message of that poem is about being confident in your own skin. And it is something that I can relate to. Not to say I can relate that I am confident enough in myself, but it's more than like, it's uh the message kind of spoke to me how supposedly I am suppo- I. I am supposed to look for my own validation not from other people. I should not- I should not prove to others that I am enough or I am pretty, but I should be the one that emits the confidence itself.*

Sheila however related with a character in the poem *Drum Dream Girl* which is the father of the persona. She felt that the father’s effort to allow his daughter to play the drums was a way to break the cycle of gender inequality. She shared she too had to break the cycle on her own when she had no other figure to depend on in her life.

*So for me, I relate to the father also, like, I don't have any other figure in my life to do that for me. So I did it by myself. And it was difficult, it was difficult to break the stereotype to break all these unsaid rules, just because, you know, we're women, but it was worth it. So I can totally relate to that poem. Yes, that’s all.*
Similar to Sheila, Irene also shared that she too related to the persona in the poem in terms of her passion for music and that it was difficult to be ambitious as a woman in her society.

Because um as I am a very like, ambitious person, uh even though you know, typical, I'm not, you know, like how people depict women is like, Oh, she's, she's a girl. She shouldn't be ambitious and whatnot. So that's what society thinks of women, which I think should not be the thing. So I kind of like, I kind of relate to the persona of that poem.

Hence, the common theme identified in the response to question four was that the students had ‘positive personal connections’ with the poems and that they felt it was successful in helping them relate them to their own lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Discussions

The findings from the semi-structured interview showed that the students had positive perceptions on reader response journals in analysing literary works despite having known of their existence for the first time through this study. They shared that it was helpful and useful in making them understand the contents of the poems thus, allowing them to critically analyse the message as well as the themes portrayed. Other than that, they felt that reader response encouraged them to relate the works to their own lives hence, enabling them to make personal connections to the texts. They added that the design could also affect their motivation to write longer and better responses if they were given more freedom to be creative to decorate their journal entries.

According to Zainor (2010), showed that students prefer journals to respond to the literary texts as they can form their own meanings of the works. Similar to the results from the interview session for this study, the students also shared the same sentiment. They were able to understand the meaning of the poems better by relating their experiences to the contents of the poem and they formed positive personal connections with the texts. For example, the student, Ivy, shared that the message of the poem Phenomenal Woman by Maya
Angelou spoke to her in a sense that she is reminded that her self-worth is not validated by others but only by herself. She is the only one who can define her own beauty as well as confidence. Thus, the use of reader response journals actually fulfilled the six goals developed by Probst (1994) in the learning of literature, such as “learners will learn about themselves”.

Fulps and Young (1991) state that reader response journals bring about positive effects on the students learning of literature such as developing “comprehension, knowledge of literature and their ability to communicate and refine ideas” in their written responses. For example, when the students related to the poem *Drum Dream Girl* by Margarita Engle, they responded mainly to the social issue of social inequality among genders. They shared that just like the persona in the poem, they had difficulty in achieving their passions and ambitions because society deems that women should focus more on building a family. As all the participants of this study are females, their responses centered on the view of a female reader, therefore forming the meaning on social inequality as the one faced by the persona. Hence, reader response journals act as an outlet for students to respond critically to literary texts without having to worry whether their responses are right or wrong.

**CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

Provide the conclusion to your study, and final words on the value of your analysis, research, or paper. Limitations of your study should be addressed. Recommendations for future research related to your topic should also be mentioned.

The purpose of this research study is to address the issue of developing critical thinking of students in the learning of literature especially in the Malaysian context. In order to achieve higher order thinking, students must be able to relate what they have learned to their own lives. Hence, students need to tap into their schemata to form these personal connections to the literary works so they may reflect upon their reading. The researcher intends to find out whether the use of reader response journals will enable students to relate the literary texts to their life experiences and create meaning from these connections.

The results of the findings from the interview session showed that all six students agreed that the use of reader response journals actually helped them in analysing the poems. They were able to critically
analyse the poems by relating it to their own lives thus, successfully conveying their feelings, thoughts and opinions in their journal responses. Similar to the views of the participants in this study, Shin (2019) stated that when students are able to reflect upon reading literary works and write their responses will they be given chances to form new connections to their own lives, cultures and history [31]. Hence, the use of reader response journals is useful and effective in helping students to reflect and relate to the poems.

In the hope of improving the learning experience of students in the education of literature, further research should be conducted on the use of reader response journals for the analysis of literary works. Future researchers are recommended to use a larger sample size and random sampling to identify the effectiveness of reader response journals for tertiary level students.

REFERENCES


Reader response journals in the analysis of literary works among undergraduate students (T. E. M. Lee, & R. Gopal)


**APPENDIX**

Cox and Many’s Stance Continuum (1992)

*Measure of Reader Stance Towards A Literary Work on An Efferent to Aesthetic Continuum*

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565