

# **Reader Response versus New Criticism: Effects on Orientations to Literary Reading**

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The past few decades have witnessed an increased interest in the Reader Response approach to literary reading as an alternative to the New Criticism approach. Although the effectiveness of both approaches has been researched, no clear conclusions have emerged that have put one approach ahead of the other. This article reports the findings of an action research study that aimed to examine the relative effectiveness of the Reader Response and the New Criticism approaches on learners' orientations to literary reading.

## **Rationale and Review of the Literature**

The New Criticism and the Reader Response approaches to reading take different views on how readers extract and construct meaning from text. The New Criticism approach emphasizes close reading of symbols, images, and the plot in order to derive the correct textual meaning, suggesting there is one correct interpretation of the literary texts under study. Grounded in the tenets of the transactional theory of reading proposed by Rosenblatt (1978), the Reader Response approach encourages and expects readers to negotiate and construct meaning through interaction between their background knowledge and the text. Proponents of this approach believe that the reader should not be eliminated as a thinker or authority in the reading classroom. Rather, the reader should produce, both orally and in writing, these personal responses and opinions about the text being read. These personal responses are viewed as the connection between the reader and the text, irrespective of the teacher and the literary critic.

According to Probst (1994), classroom teachers should aim "to develop readers, not literary critics" (p. 37). Likewise, Britton (1984) distinguished between the participant and the spectator roles in the reader's relationship with non-literary and literary texts. Specifically, this theorist maintained that the participant role is used to fulfill instrumental needs and participate in the outside world while language in the spectator role is used to contemplate events in the literary world. In the same spirit, Iser (1980, 1987) discussed reading as a dynamic process in which the reader creates meaning through interaction with the text whereby gaps in the text provide impetus for communication in the reading process. Accordingly, students should not be given the teachers' or the critics'

understandings and interpretations of the texts under study. Rather, the connections between the reader and the text should be evoked and personal thoughts and opinions should be encouraged at the expense of the inherited, single, objective, and unchanging meaning of literature. Such a practice would yield active rather than passive readers and would ensure the human meaningfulness of literature whereby readers bring various experiences to the text and are impacted psychologically and otherwise by what they read (Beach & Marshal, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1978). A basic premise in this regards is that, as students mature, they “exhibit stronger relationships between perceived similarity to story characters and factors of reader identification and suspense” (Hynds, 1989, p. 31). They also demonstrate an increasing ability to search for the underlying psychological attributes, long range goals, and the metaperspectives of the story characters.

The Reader Response and the New Criticism approaches to literary reading are somewhat reflected in the dynamics of the transactional and the transmission methods of teaching, respectively. Specifically, while the New Criticism tends to focus entirely on the text, the Reader Response approach takes textual reading a step further and “assumes an equal closeness of attention to what the juxtaposition of words stirs up within each reader” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 137). In other words, the relation between the reader and the text becomes a dynamic process in which the reader brings into text interpretations his or her linguistic and experiential background knowledge that interacts with the symbols, images, and plot of the text in order to produce meaning. Consequently, transactional classrooms are characterized by more interaction among learners than the transmission classrooms and emphasize constructivism whereby learners are encouraged to explore and construct meaning. This is because learners’ own knowledge and experiences are valued; the author and the teacher no longer enjoy the privileged place of power; and the threat of not knowing the right answer is lessened. Conversely, the transmission classroom is conducted according to an assumption that the purpose of reading is to communicate a message directly from the author’s pen. Thus, instruction in literature does not seek entertainment and is rather geared towards the pursuit of knowledge and information. Consequently, teachers who subscribe to the transmission model develop guide questions and tests as well as direct students to adhere to the format, style, and content of textbooks. They model and use various reading strategies and guide students to reach eligible interpretations, which creates a dependency on the teachers’ assumed correct reading as suggested by Straw (1990).

Previous research in literary reading seems to suggest that both of the Reader Response and the New Criticism approaches to literary reading could be beneficial. On the one hand, research into the interpretive processes of learners has underscored the richness of their engagement with the text and suggested certain differences in the degree of reliance on the text across levels of reading proficiency. For instance, Enciso (1992)

reported that more successful fifth grade students were able to engage with the story world and participate in a number of ways such as empathizing, identifying, merging, and feeling close to characters. Similarly, Smith (1992) concluded, based on empirical evidence, that less successful ninth graders were information-driven in their approach to reading literature whereas more successful readers did not submit as much to the authority of the text and exercised an active role in shaping textual meaning, thereby experiencing more meaningful interaction with the texts under study.

On the other hand, a number of other studies have indicated that traditional teaching according to the dynamics of the New Criticism approach is beneficial to students because it involves teaching them multiple strategies that allow for the development of a conscious control of the comprehension processes. For instance, Keer (2004) reported that explicit instruction enhances the reading comprehension ability of fifth grade students. Along similar lines, McCabe (2003) prompted teachers to model critical thought processes while answering questions in order to have a positive impact on students' perceptions of taking a comprehension test as a result of learning a new strategy. Similarly, Wilhelm (2001) called for lending learners expertise by using think-aloud protocols to model reading strategies, a practice that was also endorsed by Chamot and Kupper (1989) and empirically proven to be useful by Alfassi (2004).

As the preceding review of the literature demonstrates, there is no clear conclusion as to the superiority of the Reader Response approach over the New Criticism approach or vice versa. Furthermore, it is not clear in what ways the two approaches may impact learners' orientations to literary reading. Consequently, the present study examined the relative effectiveness of these approaches on readers' orientations.

The Reader Response and the New Criticism approaches were respectively operationalized in the context of this study as the transactional and transmission methods of instruction. Meanwhile, the variable of readers' orientations towards literary texts was perceived as a complex construct that encompassed the following components: insight, empathy, imagery vividness, leisure-escape, concern with author, story-driven reading, and rejection of literary values. More specifically, *insight* was perceived to combine personal and non-personal insights regarding the recognition of certain qualities in the reader and his or her world. *Imaginary vividness* referred to what becomes vividly present not only visually, but also in feeling, sound, and smell. *Empathy* indicated projective identification with fictional characters where projective identification is regarded as a means to make the characters seem real to the reader. *Leisure-escape* indicated an approach to reading that emphasizes reading for pleasure and as an enjoyable and absorbing departure from everyday responsibilities. *Concern with author* reflected interest in the author's distinctive perspective, themes, and style, as well as the author's biographical place in a literary or intellectual tradition. *Story-driven reading* reflected an

approach where the reader is focused on plot or story-line with particular emphasis on interesting action and compelling conclusion. And *rejection of literary values* represented a view of literary study as a compulsory and irrelevant task.

Specifically, the study addressed the following question: What is the relative effect of the Reader Response and the New Criticism approaches learners' orientations towards literary texts read in high school by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL)?

## Method

### Participants and Study Context

Participants in the present study were a total of 28 learners of EFL enrolled in two intact 12th grade classes at a private school located in Beirut, Lebanon. The school is a Christian establishment affiliated with the Greek Orthodox Church. The student population of the school is of middle to upper socio-economic status and the students are mostly of Lebanese nationality. The school administration had already assigned all participating students in the present study in such a manner that each class included a balanced number of male and female students of high, average, and low achieving abilities. There were 14 participants in the experimental group and 14 participants in the control group. Arabic is the native language of all participants, and they were all studying English as a first foreign language and French as a second foreign language.

The context of the study is a multilingual setting characterized by limited opportunities to use the foreign languages of English and French for daily communication. However, English is used as the language of instruction in the sciences and mathematics and is highly valued for its perceived and objective vitality in the domains of science, technology, commerce, and education.

### Study Design

The study employed a quantitative experimental pretest-posttest control group design. The independent variables in the study are the Reader Response approach and the New Criticism approach to literary reading. The dependent variable is readers' orientations towards literary texts.

### Instrument

The Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) (Miall & Kuiken, 1995) was used to assess the participants' literary orientations (see Appendix for questionnaire). This measure includes sub-scales that address the seven different aspects of readers' orientation towards literary texts: insight, empathy, imagery vividness, leisure-escape, concern with author, story-driven reading, and rejection of literary values. The questionnaire contains 68 items that address the aspects of literary orientations under study as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Number of Items and Reliability Level of the LRQ Seven Sub-Scales*

Sub-Scales	Number of items	Alpha Level
Insight	14	.82
Imagery Vividness	9	.94
Empathy	7	.91
Leisure/Escape	11	.89
Concern with Author	10	.85
Story-driven Reading	8	.84
Rejection of Literature	9	.94

Students were asked to read each item and rate how much they agree or disagree with the statement. They rated the items using a 5-point Likert system (1= not at all true, 2= slightly true, 3= moderately true, 4= quite true, and 5= extremely true).

The overall internal consistency of the LRQ as well as the consistency of the sub-scales within the this instrument are high ranging from  $\alpha = .82$  to  $\alpha = .94$  as reported by its developers Miall & Kuiken, (1995). Furthermore, additional analysis, based on data from the present study, also indicated similar results as shown in Table 1.

### **Treatment**

The treatment lasted for 4 weeks at the rate of 6 sessions per week. Each session lasted for 50 minutes during which students in the experimental and control groups read the same the material. However, the transactional method of instruction was used to teach students in the experimental group. Students in the control group followed the instructional procedures suggested in their textbook, which reflected the steps of the transmission model of instruction. Specifically, while students in the experimental group were encouraged to express their emotional reactions as well as to describe, conceive, explain, connect, interpret, and judge the literary texts under study, students in the control group built background knowledge prior to reading the story, read the texts in class, discussed the content, and made inferences through teacher directed questions.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

All participating students in the control and experimental groups completed the LRQ prior to and at the conclusion of the study. Collected data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, and a multivariate analysis

of covariance test (MANCOVA) conducted to address the question raised in the study regarding the effect of the Reader Response and New Criticism on readers' orientations to literary study. The treatment conditions, Reader Response and New Criticism, were used as independent variables. Meanwhile, the dependent variable, readers' orientations towards literary texts, was measured by composite LRQ scores computed by adding the scores on the items in the sub-scales that measure these orientations. Students' LRQ responses collected prior to the study were used as covariates and responses collected at the conclusion of the study as dependent variables.

## Results

The results are reported in Table 2 and reveal three aspects of interest. First, there were statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the control group on the literary orientation variables of insight, leisure-escape, and concern with author. That is, students who applied the Reader Response approach by following the dynamics of transactional teaching perceived that they recognized in themselves and in the real world some previously unrecognized qualities more than their counterparts in the control group. Furthermore, they put more emphasis on reading for pleasure as an enjoyable departure from everyday responsibilities as well as became more interested with the authors' distinctive perspective, themes, and style and in his or her biographical place in a literary and intellectual tradition.

Table 2

*ANOVA Summary For Reader's Orientations by Experimental and Control Conditions*

Orientation	Experimental (n = 14)		Control (n = 14)		F	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Insight	46.21	6.96	38.85	9.02	8.49	<.05
Empathy	20.92	5.77	16.50	7.32	3.65	>.05
Imagery Vividness	30.50	6.09	23.07	9.26	3.20	>.05
Leisure/Escape	32.71	7.69	25.64	8.87	5.59	<.05
Concern with Author	33.50	5.08	27.42	7.73	6.20	<.05
Story-driven Reading	26.00	6.16	20.85	7.10	0.88	>.05
Rejection of Literature	20.78	6.57	27.07	5.73	14.56	<.05

Second, there was a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups in favor of the control group on the variable of rejection of literary values. Specifically, students in the control group who were instructed according to the transmission model tended to regard literary reading as more of a compulsory and irrelevant task.

Finally, the differences between the experimental and the control groups did not reach the level of statistical significance on the variables of empathy, imagery vividness, and story-driven reading. Although the mean scores of the experimental group are relatively higher than those of the control group on the above variables as shown in Table 2, the differences with regard to identification with fictional characters, imaginary elaborations of the literary world, and focus on the plot and story line were statistically insignificant between the two groups.

## Discussion

Results of the study demonstrate that the Reader Response approach could positively affect students' orientations to literary reading especially with regard to insight, leisure-escape, and concern with author, and the appreciation of literary values. It appears that students in the experimental group reacted to reading differently regarding the insight factor in which the literary text fostered their recognition of previously unrecognized qualities in their world. Moreover, students in the experimental group reacted differently to reading regarding the leisure-escape factor in which they emphasized reading for pleasure, enjoyment, and departure from everyday responsibilities. Students, as well, reflected interest in the author's distinctive perspective, themes, and style. Furthermore, students in the experimental group rejected the traditional instructional presentation of literary texts.

The preceding results corroborate those of Smith (1992) and Enciso (1992) who reported that students who learn through the Reader Response approach are more willing to enter the world of the literary text and create meaning. One possible explanation of these findings could be that as students are encouraged to express their responses to literature, they develop a positive attitude towards reading literature and begin to be impacted by what they read. Conversely, students may lose motivation to read literature when they are not allowed to enter the literary world of the works under study and are simply given inherited interpretations of what they read.

The treatment, on the other hand, showed no significant results or major differences between the experimental group and the control group regarding three factors of reading orientations: imagery, empathy, and story-driven reading. Students in both the experimental and the control group were somewhat similar in their reactions towards an

imaginary elaboration of a literary text, in identifying a significant relationship with the characters of the texts, and in showing a particular emphasis on interesting actions or compelling conclusions regarding the texts that they read. These three orientations to literary reading all associate the manner of approaching literature with reading literature, and this result suggests that changing these orientations would require longer interventions. The treatment in the present study lasted for 4 weeks only and may have not been long enough to make a significant change in these orientations. Consequently, longer interventions are needed to ascertain whether the Reader Response approach would change students' manner of reading literature across the variables of imagery, empathy, and story-driven reading in various linguistic and socio-cultural context.

Likewise, further qualitative research is needed to examine the generalizability of these findings to different contexts. There is much more to challenge, interest, or enjoyment than could be simply measured by one instrument. Future qualitative research may complement and generate better understanding of the quantitative findings from the present study. Finally, the findings of the present study suggest the need for teachers to encourage students to read and attempt to form and articulate their own thoughts and feelings about a piece of literature. As students become comfortable in developing their own thoughts and feelings about a text, interaction with their classmates will become a natural response.

### **Ideas for Implementing a Reader Response Approach**

The Reader Response approach aims to enable learners to expand their responses to literature and to enhance their critical stance towards literary texts. Specifically, learners are trained in this approach to engage with the text through expression of their thoughts and feelings about what they read. They also describe texts, understand characters' traits, beliefs, and motives, connect the text with own prior experiences, interpret the symbolic meaning of the theme and specific events, and judge the characters and the literary quality of the text as suggested by Beach and Marshal (1991). Of particular relevance to achieve these aims would be classroom techniques such as journaling, retelling, think-alouds, mapping, question-asking, reflection, and judging. Through think alouds, learners can express their thoughts and feelings about what they read. They can also generate questions about the text and map the meaning of the actions of characters as well as judge the authors' values and the literary quality of what they read. Engaging in free-writing activities and class discussions gives learners the chance to express their emotional reactions to the literary texts under study. They may also list the events and categorize them into important and less important categories in order to reproduce the information provided by the authors.



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## Appendix

### Literary Response Questionnaire

Read each statement carefully. Then using this scale, rate the extent to which the statement is true of you:

- 1 = not at all true (false)
- 2 = slightly true
- 3 = moderately true
- 4 = quite true
- 5 = extremely true

On the attached answer sheet, circle the number that corresponds to your rating. Please do not mark your answers on this questionnaire.

#### **Insight**

1. Reading literature makes me sensitive to aspects of my life that I usually ignore
2. In literature, I sometimes recognize feelings that I have overlooked during my daily life
3. I often find my shortcomings explored through characters in literary texts
4. I find that literature helps me to understand the lives of people that differ from myself
5. Reading literature often gives me insights into the nature of people and events in my world
6. I often see similarities between events in literature and events in my own life
7. I often find my own motives being explored through characters in literary texts
8. I find that certain literary works help me to understand my more negative feelings
9. Literature enables you to understand people that you'd probably disregard in normal life
10. I sometimes find that reading a literary text makes me feel like changing the way I live
11. In my reading, I learn to recognize more readily certain types of people or events, i.e., I can see these types more clearly after reading about a particular example in a literary text
12. When I begin to understand a literary text, it's because I've been able to relate it to my own concerns about life
13. Literature often gives special emphasis to those things that make a moral point

14. Sometimes while reading literature my feelings draw me toward a distinctly unsettling view of life

### **Imagery Vividness**

1. I often see the places in stories I read as clearly as if I were looking at a picture
2. I can readily visualize the persons and places described in a novel or short story
3. I sometimes think I could draw a map of the places I have read about in a work of fiction
4. Sometimes a scene from a story or poem is so clear that I know its smell, its touch, its "feel"
5. I often hear dialogue in a novel as though I were listening to an actual conversation
6. When I read a literary text, a scene that is only partly described often becomes a whole, vividly present place in my mind
7. When reading a story, sometimes I can almost feel what it would be like to be there
8. I usually hear the tone of speech in a dialogue from a story or novel
9. Often when I read literary texts, descriptions of smells suggest colors, descriptions of colors suggest feelings, and so on

### **Empathy**

1. Sometimes I feel like I've almost "become" a character I've read about in fiction
2. I sometimes have imaginary dialogues with people in fiction
3. When I read fiction I often think about myself as one of the people in the story
4. I sometimes wonder whether I have really experienced something or whether I have read about it in a book
5. I actively try to project myself into the role of fictional characters, almost as if I were preparing to act in a play
6. Sometimes characters in novels almost become like real people in my life
7. After reading a novel or story that I enjoyed, I continue to wonder about the characters almost as though they were real people

### **Leisure Escape**

1. Sometimes I like to curl up with a good book just to enjoy myself
2. When I have spare time, my favorite activity is reading a novel
3. Very often I cannot put down a story until I have finished reading it
4. Reading literature is a pleasurable way to spend time when I have nothing else to do
5. Reading a story is a wonderful way to relax

6. While reading, I completely forget what time it is
7. I find that reading literature is a great help in taking my mind off my own problems
8. I like to become so absorbed in the world of the literary text that I forget my everyday concerns
9. Once I've discovered one work by an author I like, I usually try to read all the other works by that author
10. I am often so involved in what I am reading that I am no longer aware of myself
11. I often wish I had more time for reading literature

**Concern with Author**

1. One of my primary interests in reading literature is to learn about the themes and concerns of a given author
2. In reading, I like to focus on what is distinctive about the author's style
3. One of my primary interests in reading is to learn about the different genres of literature
4. I like to see how a particular author's work relates to other literature of the author's period
5. When reading, I usually try to identify an author's distinctive themes
6. One of my primary interests in reading literature is to appreciate the author's understanding of society and culture
7. I think literature is especially interesting when it illuminates facts about the author's life
8. When I find a work of literature I like, I usually try to find out something about the author
9. The challenge of literature is to comprehend the author's unique view of life
10. I am often intrigued by an author's literary technique

**Story-driven Reading**

1. I like to see tension building up in the plot of a story
2. The type of literature I like best tells an interesting story
3. I think the most important part of fiction or drama is plot
4. When reading a novel, what I most want to know is how the story turns out
5. I like it best when a story has an unexpected ending
6. I prefer to read fiction in which there is plenty of action
7. When reading a novel, my main interest is seeing what happens to the characters

8. I find it difficult to read a novel in which nothing much seems to happen

### **Rejection of Literary Values**

1. I think people should spend less time talking or writing about literature
2. Even if literature were well taught, I think high schools should not devote so much time to it
3. For me a work of literature is destroyed by trying to analyze it
4. One of the things I dislike most about being a student of literature is the teacher who tells you what a literary text means
5. Reading literary texts from past centuries should be left to literary scholars and historians
6. I don't believe that literature is socially relevant
7. I disliked English in high school because most of the texts, I was asked to read I would not have chosen myself
8. Works of literature often seem to make the issues of life more complicated than they actually are
9. If I want to spend time reading, I don't choose "literary" texts

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## Conference Announcements

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**English in Southeast Asia (ESEA).** December 4-6, 2008. The 13th International Conference on English in Southeast Asia will be held at the National Institute of Education in Singapore, “Englishes and Literatures-in-English in a Globalised World.” Web site <http://www.ell.nie.edu.sg/esea2008/ESEAhome.html>

**Hawaii TESOL 2009.** February 14, 2009. “Ideas That Work For the ESL Student, Teacher, and Program,” University of Hawaii at Hilo on the island of Hawaii. Web site <http://www.hawaiitesol.org/AnnualConference.html>

**CamTESOL.** February 21-22, 2009. “The Globalization of ELT: Emerging Directions.: National Institute of Education (NIE) in Phnomh Penh, Cambodia. Web site <http://www.camtesol.org/2009conference/index.html>

**ELT-Con 2009.** April 22-24, 2009. “Language Matters: New Ways of Looking at English Language Teaching and Learning.” Fourth English language teaching conference organized by the Penang English Language Learning & Teaching Association (PELLTA) at the Bayview Hotel in Penang, Malaysia. Web site <http://eltcon.webs.com/>

**JALT Pan-SIG.** May 23-24, 2009. “Infinite Possibilities: Expanding Limited Opportunities in Language Education. Toyo Gakuen University, Nagreyama Campus, in Chiba. Web site <http://pansig.org/2009/>

**Asia TEFL.** August 7-9, 2009. “Collaboration and Creativity in English Language Teaching and Learning in Asia.” 7th Conference to be held at the Imperial Queens Park Hotel in Bangkok, Thailand. Web site <http://www.asiatefl.org/2009conference/conference2.html>

**TESOL Arabia.** March 12-14, 2009. “Learning in English: English in Learning.” J.W. Marriot Hotel, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. E-mail [leskirkham@gmail.com](mailto:leskirkham@gmail.com). Web site <http://tesolarabia.org>

**TESOL Greece.** March 14-15, 2009. “Back to the Future: English for All Ages.” Hellenic American Union, Athens, Greece. E-mail [pitychoutis@yahoo.com](mailto:pitychoutis@yahoo.com). Web site <http://tesolgreece.com>

**English Language Teacher’s Association of India.** August 21-23, 2009. “Managing Mixed-Ability Classes.” E-mail [eltai\\_india@yahoo.com](mailto:eltai_india@yahoo.com). Web site <http://eltai.org>