Integrating Reader Response Theory into EFL Classroom at Farhangian University

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Abstract: The integration of literature in TEFL has recently achieved a profound status. The applicability and efficiency of RRT in EFL settings are great educational objectives. This article deals with the introduction of Reader Response Theory to language teaching in Teacher Training Centers. The subjects were 120 sophomore students at Farhangian University, Shahid Modaress and Imam Jafar-e-Sadegh Campuses. An experimental design was used in the study. Instead of offering the regular teaching textbooks, eight grade-three short stories were presented for language teaching purposes. The data analysis revealed that the application of RRA to teaching general English in Farhangian University proved to be highly successful and it improved the learners' language learning significantly. This proved to be highly successful with girls than boys. The incorporation of Reader Response Theory is highly recommended in university curriculum for better language learning and teaching.

Keywords: Reader Response Theory, reading comprehension, Teacher Training Center, short stories

INTRODUCTION

Research in literature has followed mostly a library-based procedure for many years. Hence, the majority of the research done have been based on analysis and interpretation procedure. Literature has been studied for two major purposes: entertainment or interpretation. The study and analysis of literature has been done using different theories and approaches of literary criticism; therefore, the analysis of the works of art in this way has got profound consideration and reappraisal of the already tried techniques and procedures. In this article, I have tried to apply action research to literature and story genre study, especially the ones used for teaching purposes at educational settings. This novelty in the design and procedure of the research may lead to a better understanding of literary pieces and may bear better results; such studies would reveal the hidden aspirations and interests of the writers and readers whose understanding would be out of question in any other way round; this is, to a large extent, because "the urge of human feeling to express them snd to encourage its interest in humanity aspects has forced human to make a literary work" (Kurniawan and Khudlori, 2018, p.117) which has always been

a safe source of inspiration and salvation for the better being of human life. Such analyses would flourish the mind and would pave the way for the better deployment and assessment of the works among which one special concept has focused "on the relative influence of the reader, the text, and the reading situation on how the reading transaction is shaped" (Beach, 1993, p. 2); this procedure forms the major core of RRT in TEFL.

Reader Response Theory

The history of literature criticism has followed diverse trend. Eagleton (1983, p. 74) has characterized the history of modern literary theory as occurring in three stages: a romantic "preoccupation with the author", a new critical "exclusive concern with the text", and finally, "a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years". These three stages have clearly introduced different stages and orientation of criticism trends.

Among the three approaches, reader-response theory has been considered a crucial approach to engage readers in reading and responding to literature (Hirvela, 1996). Reader-response theory deals mainly with the readers and the way they interact with the text on the way of cajoling the intended meaning out of the text. It puts forward what the readers as individuals come up with. Meanwhile, the learner may "disregard linguistic elements in favour of other modalities" (Lutge, 2017, p. 302). This procedure highlights that the way materials are understood, the role of the reader, and the active role of reader in understanding and cajoling meaning out the text as well as meaning construction all depend on the readers' previous experience of the text and his or her interpretation procedures. Readers' interpretation occurs when they interact with the text, choose, assert, or write their understanding of the text and its organization.

As Rosenblatt states, "what the organism selects out and seeks to organize according to already acquired habits, assumptions, and expectations" forms the basis of the context in which it acts (1978, p. 17). Rosenblatt, with this regard, adds that a reader's understanding of a text is not an illustration, but the reconstruction of what the reader does with the text. Reader-response theory changes the critical focus from a text to a reader. It orientates the emphasis away from the text as the main source of information to the reader and decoder as the assigner of new layers of meaning to the text through reading process and the creation of meaning of the text. From his view point, the reader bases his or her understanding of the text on the already existing schemata, habits, presupposition, and mental categories of the constructs. These will lead to the emergence of individual and personal interpretation of the text, its themes, and its conceptual idiosyncrasy. Rosenblatt (2005b) confirms that during and after an aesthetic transaction, "the reader has a response to the event", that calls for the rearrangement of his/ her attitudes and findings about the text at hand.

RRT puts forward a number of interesting activities that enable students to think critically and creatively about what they study and understand. This theory encourages students to surpass the literal levels of reading and proceed to the higher levels of reading and understanding; it paves the way for learning "language in an authentic context through literary texts" (Faiyaz, 2020, p. 38). Accordingly, students thus get involved into the process of interpreting, thinking, applying, and reappraising about literature while they read passages of different types. What happens, thereafter, would be a kind of acquisition-like language learning. The stories provide them with the image of the real world and the reflection of the problems of the world in which they live and they gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own insights, enable them to speak English in front of their classmates and in public as part of their initial education as future teachers; this will inspire them to apply this procedure in their future classes too. More importantly, this thoughtful process of reading flourishes their minds to improve their critical thinking techniques. Likewise, this happens easily as students read literature,

interact with the text, and interpret what they are exposed to. Through the interpretation of what they read, they can come up with the real meaning of the constructs and expressions creatively. Hence, they get acquainted with the real power and meaning of what literature can convey and enable them to learn how to apply literature in their classes, manipulate it for their intended purposes, and deploy literature in EFL while they are in-service teachers.

What should be taken into account about RRT is the fact that it is not founded on arbitrary or senseless comments from the reader; rather, it is based on finding meaning in the act of reading literature itself and coming up with the ways readers experience the world and what culture implicate via the literary passages and texts. This reminds us of one of the key elements of RRT in which new and novel meanings could be cajoled out of the literary texts. Similarly, a literary work is not an object that stands alone but it provides the same view to each reader individually which adds to the creativity of this trend. This potentiality acts as a source that "monologically reveals its timeless essence" (Jauss, 1982, p.21). Hence, when choosing materials to use in an EFL class, we should look at its specific literary qualities and whether our students are able to "navigate their own way through them" (Sualih & Fente, 2020, p.1202); this will help them out to get involved in RRA activities in the course of language learning.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The majority of researches done in literature have been mainly library-based in orientation; few have been tried out practically. This research is somehow practical and action-based in nature. Theoretically, much has been done on reader response theory of literary criticism but, practically, not much attention has been paid to this modern approach to literary criticism knowing the fact that the final analysis forms in the minds of the readers as the second continuum of decoding the coded meaning of the author or beyond that. Taking into account the question of authenticity of materials and real-life nature of language learning setting, the research done by Faiyaz (2020) shed light on the creation and detection of similar language learning condition in Iran. This idea triggered the researcher to apply reader response theory to language classes. Readers are equipped with the imaginary tools of different types. Iser in The Range of Interpretation (2000) indicates that fiction and imagination interact to illuminate different interpretive forms to emphasize the view of different types of study like sociology, politics, science, and their detection in literature. Practically, this theory has been implemented in many classrooms for diverse purposes (Harfitt & Chu, 2011; Giovanelli, & Mason, 2015; Mizuno, 2015), and the findings were positive in general.

Pedagogically, Garzón1 & Castañeda-Peña1 (2015) have dealt with the implementation of the reader-response theory in a class of English as a foreign language with language pre-service teachers as they experience the reading of two short stories. Practically, Mitchell (1993) has conducted a study on reader response theory putting forward some practical applications for the High school literature classroom whereby better manifestation can be seen. In another research by Carlisle (2000) who has dealt with reading logs and the application of reader response theory in ELT, which is a real class application of this criticism approach. Other researchers (Sun, 2003; Arnold, 2009; Chen et al., 2013; Safaeia & Bulca, 2013) have also tried out studies on the application of RRT to the improvement of reading skill on second language learners.

Hien (2013, p. 152) on the line of deployment of RRA in teaching literature at university level pinpoints an implicit purpose of developing teachers' pedagogical capabilities and improving students' "cognitive academic language proficiency in literature-based classes in educational settings". Mishra (2010) detects a relationship between reader-response approach and Communicative Language Teaching approach. He reveals that this approach enhances class

interactions, results in autonomous and individualized learning, and flourishes class atmosphere to talk of their minds. Accordingly, a kind of interpretive and critical learning emerges which proves to be an optimal kind of learning.

Pasaribu and Iswandari (2019) have detected the relationship between RRA and critical thinking procedures. More specifically, Al-Bulushi (2011) who investigated the use of reader-response theory in an EFL context also emphasizes the connection between reader-response theory and communicative language teaching and explains that the reader response theory supports communicative language teaching since it is task-based in approach and can achieve productive skills easily. What really makes RRA approach communicative in function is the purpose of the tasks assigned by teachers in engaging learners in activities which require them to generate personal responses to something in the text; these responses reiterate the original meaning and go far beyond what the writer may have envisaged for the conveyance of his ideas in the text.

This study focused on the following research questions:

1- Is there a significant difference between Teaching Approach and Students' performance on Achievement Tests?
2- Does Gender affect students' performance on achievement tests?
3- Is there a correlation between Teaching Approach, Gender, and students' performance on achievement tests?

METHODOLOGY

Design and Subjects

In this research, as pre-test and post-test have been deployed; the design used is a true experimental design. The pre and post tests were mainly based on reading, vocabulary, and structure elements. It was a tailored proficiency test in which the validity and reliability had already been confirmed by experts. Participants of the study were 120 female and male Iranian university students studying Education sciences at Moddaress and Imam Sadegh Farhangian University campuses in Ilam, a city in the west of Iran. The participants had an age range of 18 to 23 years old. They were all sophomore students who had to take the compulsory General English language course. The classes were held on two consecutive days in a week during winter term. Based on Nelson test administered before the treatment sessions, it became clear that 120 of the participants were at homogenous proficiency level.

Procedure and Instrumentation

This study went through various procedures. These procedures included selecting the subjects, pre-test, treatment assignment, and post-test. After making sure about the participants' homogeneity based on their grade average point and Nelson test, there were 60 students in the two control groups, 30 students in the first experimental group, and 30 in the second experimental group. The mean score for four groups were compared through an ANCOVA at the .05 level of significance.

The treatment for all groups lasted 16 consecutive weeks and the students had to participate in 2 classes each week. Therefore, all in all, each student participated for 24 sessions in the classes. A week after the treatment, the participants took the same achievement exam.

The stories were selected based on special gradation all at grade three which is most appropriate for teaching English at this level due to the proficiency level and the coverage of materials. The stories were The Earthquake by Elizabeth Laird, Another World by Elaube O' Reilly, Anne of Green Gables by LM Montgomey, Stories of O Burton, and Amazon Rally by Eduardo Amos and Elisabeth Prescher, the Worlds by H. W. Wells, Sweeny Todd Anonymous, and Sixteen Ghost Stories by S. H.

Although the major criteria for choosing the stories, as suggested by Hişmanoğl (2005) were motivation, interest, and proficiency level of the learners, the main criterion concerned was the impact of the stories on the students' language learning intended by the researcher.

Treatment for the control group

The methods adopted to teach the control groups were the normal teaching strategies applied for such courses at universities which were based on text books developed for teaching such language courses at the universities. The selected course book for the students was Reading Through Interaction Book one by Akbar Mirhassani. The textbooks consist of 14 reading passages provided with pre-reading and post-reading activities; each consisting of a few comprehension exercises, vocabulary practices, and grammar presentations. The major objective of the text book as outlined by the ministry of higher education has been to improve the learners' reading comprehension skill. The students were asked to translate the text, do the exercises, and complete the lesson as the focal core of class procedure.

Treatment for the Experimental groups

The experimental groups received the treatment based on the reader response approach. For the experimental groups, the following procedure was implemented. It included three phases: pre-reading activities, reading activities in class, and follow-up activities.

In the pre-reading activities, students had the chance to read the story at home and get familiarized with the major elements of the story as well as the unknown vocabulary items. After reading the short stories at home, the participants were asked to give a brief summary of the story. The teacher, however, asked the students' to share ideas regarding literary elements of the story such as theme, characters, plot, and so on. Additionally, the participants were implicitly provided with the introduction of the elements of the story including characterization, theme, setting, point of view, grammatical elements, style, diction, and mode of presentation.

The key in this approach was to let the participants deal with the stories from their own unique perspective; this indicates that the teacher stops sidetracking the learners' interpretation of the stories as they read the materials. To operationalize the treatment, the following steps were taken to implement the reader response approach in the teaching and learning process. Initially, the students were asked to read the story at home. Following Mitchell (1993), the students were required to think about as many questions as possible about the story and its content such as;

What would you like to talk about after reading this?
What issues did it raise for you? Were there parts that confused you?
Is there anything you want to ask about any of the characters?

After attending the class, the students began discussing the questions posed by the teacher and the ones they developed to use in the class; they tried them with their classmates and the instructor was just the conductor and controller of the process of the discussion respectively. The students were constantly reminded that the emphasis on getting students to respond to the

story and the questions does not mean that there is one best response. Students were also continuously motivated to revise the story and find clues to shed light on their views.

In order to involve the students in the story, in the next stage, following Khatib (2011), the participants were required to present their ideas about the main characters of the story and say if they liked characters, whether they could find anybody in real life similar to the character and what they would do if they were in place of the character. They were also asked if they were the author, how they would have arranged the plot of the story.   The instructor paved the way for the real involvement of the students in the class discussion based on projecting his ideas on the students and brainstorming them with what they wanted to understand from what they had come up with during reading and discussion activities. This made the procedures easier for the learners' involvement in the class discussion.

As the final stage, the students were asked if there were any changes in their opinions; the instructor paved the way for the learners to present the main points of the story, its structure, its diction, and every related part to share what they wanted to talk of their minds and challenge them with the other members of the class.
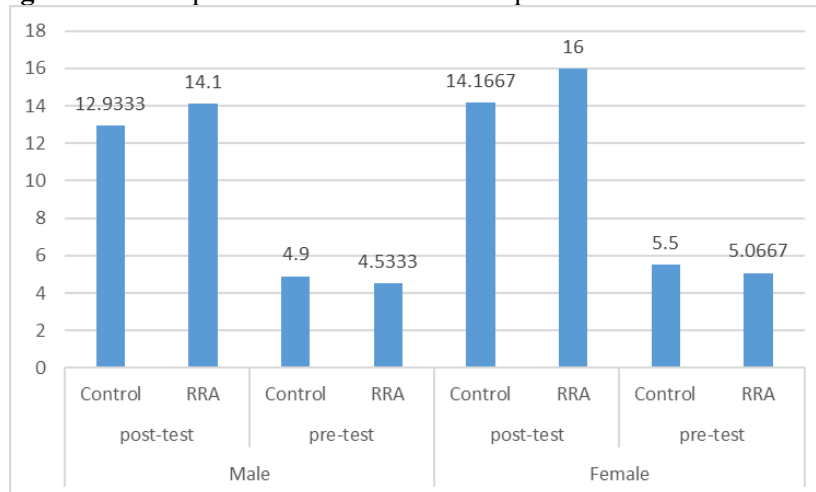
FINDINGS

The following SPSS analyses were carried out on the collected data. The descriptive and inferential analyses are as follows.

Table 1: Descriptive Data: Reader Response and Gender Variables

Gender			N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
M	post-test	Control	30	12.9333	1.41259	12.4059	13.4608
		RRA	30	14.1000	1.66816	13.4771	14.7229
		Total	60	13.5167	1.64153	13.0926	13.9407
	Pre-test	Control	30	4.9000	1.95378	4.1704	5.6296
		RRA	30	4.5333	1.85199	3.8418	5.2249
		Total	60	4.7167	1.89640	4.2268	5.2066
F	post-test	Control	30	14.1667	2.45066	13.2516	15.0818
		RRA	30	16.0000	1.78113	15.3349	16.6651
		Total	60	15.0833	2.31642	14.4849	15.6817
	Pre-test	Control	30	5.5000	1.81469	4.8224	6.1776
		RRA	30	5.0667	1.61743	4.4627	5.6706
		Total	60	5.2833	1.71821	4.8395	5.7272

Figure 1: Descriptive Statistics: Reader Response and Gender Variables

The findings in Figure 1 show that boys' mean score in the control group pre-test is 4.90 and in the RRA group is 4.53. The mean score of the post-test for the boys in the control group is 12.93 whereas the mean score of RRA group is 14.10. It also shows that the girls in the control group scored 5.50 and RRA group scored 5.07 in the pre-test. While for post-test scores, the girls in the control group scored a mean score of 14.17 and RRA group's mean score is 16.00.

Table 2: Covariance on Gender and RRA Groups

Dependent Variable: post-test

Gender	Teaching Approach	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	Normal	12.945[a]	.340	12.271	13.619
	RRA	14.155[a]	.343	13.475	14.834
Female	Normal	14.108[a]	.344	13.427	14.789
	RRA	15.992[a]	.340	15.318	16.666

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values:
pretest = 5.0000.

The above table 2 shows that after conversion of pre-test results, the male students in the control group scored 12.945 and the experimental group scored 14.155 As for the female group results, the pre-test results show that the control group scored 14.108 and the experimental group scored 15.992.

As for the main hypothesis, there is no significance difference between gender and teaching approach in students' performance on pre and post-tests. The following table 3 sheds light on this result.

Table 3. Approach and Gender Mean scores on pre and post-tests - Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (ANCOVA)

Dependent Variable: post-test

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	149.704[a]	4	37.426	10.774	.000	.273
Intercept	2546.487	1	2546.487	733.038	.000	.864
pretest	5.237	1	5.237	1.508	.222	.013
Gender	65.862	1	65.862	18.959	.000	.142
Approach	70.892	1	70.892	20.407	.000	.151
Gender * Approach	3.412	1	3.412	.982	.324	.008
Error	399.496	115	3.474			
Total	25088.000	120				
Corrected Total	549.200	119				

a. R Squared = .273 (Adjusted R Squared = .247)

The results show that (F (1,115) =20.407, p<0.001) F ratio for main impact is 20.407 which proves statistically significant after the pre-test. Hence, there is a significant difference between pre and post-tests regarding RRA teaching approach compared with the normal approach. The comparison of pre and post-test results regarding RRA teaching approach and the normal one shows that the scores of RRA after controlling pre-test is 15.07 and the mean score of normal teaching approach after controlling pre-test equals 13.52. Moreover, the comparison of pre and post-tests regarding gender reveals that the mean score of male groups after controlling pre-test is 13.55 and their female counterparts is 15.05. Consequently, it can be concluded that the RRA teaching approach is more effective than the normal teaching approach. Additionally, the cross comparison of means shows the girls significantly outperformed the boys in the RRA approach implementation.

Discussion

There is an ever-increasing interest in using literature in EFL settings. Reader response as an approach to literary analysis can orientate EFL learners' attention towards learning the foreign language and its skills. Short stories, for example, prove to be a new experience and a great innovation for deployment in an academically formal English courses instead of the regular pre-packaged course books. This new approach orientated the research. As the findings revealed, if students approach reading text as an aesthetic experience; their feelings as well as their personal responses are activated in the process of reading and learning English, a new kind of learning language is achieved which proves to be a good and enjoyable procedure for teaching and learning English stabilizing its status in English courses in Iranian universities.

The major rationale behind the deployment of this approach has been what Çubukcu (2007, p. 63) holds:

> "everything the reader brings to the text is important and this response is always structured by the language of the text and the literary experience is a *transaction*, in which neither the text nor the reader can be seen as the sole repository of meaning"

Similar to other studies conducted in the application of RRT (Mitchell, 1993; Carlisle, 2000; Sun, 2003; Itisnawati, 2009; Arnold, 2009; Chen et al., 2013; Safaeia & Bulca, 2013;

Mizuno, 2015; Garzón1 & Castañeda-Peña1, 2015), this study revealed a new application of RRT to Farhangian university setting and confirmed its efficiency. While Rashtchi's (2019) finding mainly deals with writing skill, this research's findings proved that RRT work well with the overall impact of this approach on language learning which implicates its general impact over other language skills too. Similarly, this research encourages us to stabilize the comprehensive power of RRT and its scope which has a wider area of coverage than the previous studies mentioned and discussed.

Due to the better performance of the experimental groups, one can come up with this idea that the application of short stories via the frame work of Reader Response Theory can pave the way for the better learning and teaching of English at academic settings as the treatment got the students fully involved with the texts. Additionally, it clearly corresponds with what Carlisle's (2000) argues for the application of logs. As he explains, keeping logs gives the learners the opportunity to surpass the literal meaning of the text towards aesthetic appreciation and understanding of the passages which is a kind of authentic learning. In this way, all cognitive and affective aspects of human being are involved in the process of learning language which leads to the utmost type of learning. It, for sure, ends in the learners' interaction with the text and leads to a more promising comprehension of the passages. This has paved the way for the better performance of the two experimental groups on the post-test. One justification may be the fact that the students in the experimental group realized that the act of reading proves to be an aesthetic practice rather than information gathering. This happens mainly because the students' zest and interest are intrigued by the procedures put forward by the Reader Response Approach which hinge on the students' personal experiences and their own paced learning. The results revealed the minor outperformance of the girls in the experimental group over the boy's may be due to their closer attention and sensible understanding of literary pieces.

Overall, the study indicates that the technique can be used to introduce a novel experience which would lead to new implementation of new materials with new presentation procedures and approaches. It shows that the types of materials were more authentic, learner-centered, and more alluring for the students in the process of learning languages at universities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The introduction of Reader Response Theory to TEFL has recently attained a great status. This study revealed the introduction of this theory to teaching English in Farhangian University. Clearly, the kind of teaching approach would be in close congruence with the material deployed during the course. The selection of stories as teaching materials which would lend themselves best to RRT compared with the normal class teaching and normal textbooks was the igniting motive behind the accomplishment of this research which revealed the better performance of students in RRT approach group using short stories for language learning and practice. The female students proved to outperform the male ones in the experimental group favoring this approach and these types of texts; this highlights this idea that these materials work well with the female university language learners. Accordingly, language learners, syllabus designers, and curriculum developers are highly recommended to use short stories and RRT approach for TEFL in academic places and specifically university settings. In the case of Farhangian University which is in charge of training teachers for the ministry of education, this suggestion seems totally crucial and practical. The incorporation of authentic literary materials such as short stories instead of the commonly developed texts in Iran academic settings in accordance with RRT procedures, would enhance learners' better command of English language skills and their more real-life and authentic language learning.

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