Conceptualising Literary Responses of L2 Readers: An Exploratory Study

Khairul Husna Abdul Kadir, Tengku Nor Rizan Tengku Mohamad Maasum, and Ravichandran Vengadasamy

Abstract—**This paper discusses the Foregrounding Theory and Transactional Theory of Literary Reading and their application in analysing and conceptualising literary responses of L2 readers from a secondary school in Malaysia. Exploratory in nature, this study aims to identify the response types evoked in L2 readers while reading a narrative text in addition to investigating the effect of proficiency levels on completing identification task and written comments. Twenty-four participants aged sixteen, were instructed to read a story, identify the foregrounded features in the text followed by writing comments about the story and their reading experience. In the identification task, high proficient participants performed better in identifying foregrounded features in the story (*metaphor, personification, repetition*). With regard to the written responses, most participants, regardless of proficiency levels, responded primarily to the story world (*character*, *event* or *setting*) especially through empathy with the main character and reflection on the event in the story. In sum, overall findings indicate that responses of the L2 readers were primarily motivated by the narrative aspects (empathy with the main character and reflection on the story events) rather than evoked by the aesthetic component of the text (literary devices). Hence this study conceptualises literary responses of the participants to be predominantly *narrative*- rather than aesthetically–oriented.**

Index Terms— **Literary response, L2 readers, foregrounding theory, transactional theory.**

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we present evidence from previous research which has shown how literary texts can evoke in readers some types of responses due to; first, the special formal, linguistic or stylistic features of the text known as *foregrounding,* and second, the story world of fictional characters, events or/and settings. In other words, there are two types of response orientation elicited by a literary text: aesthetic and narrative response orientation.

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Aesthetic-oriented responses are derived from readers' identification of the foregrounded elements or literary devices like *metaphor*, *simile*, *personification*, *repetition* and *rhyme* while narrative-oriented responses result from readers' transaction with the settings, events or/and characters portrayed in the story. Of the two, aesthetic responses involve greater 'internal' engagement with the text as readers develop deeper understanding of the subtle nuances conveyed through the literary text and how they contribute to the overall theme of the story. On the other hand, responses to the narrative are what sustain readers' interest to keep them reading the story. In this exploratory study, we explore the application of foregrounding and transactional theory of literary reading in analysing and describing L2 readers' responses toward one L2 text. Based on the findings, significant data emerged which warrant further in-depth and rigorous future research.

II. CONCEPTUALISING LITERARY READING

A. Foregrounding Theory

Foregrounding theory is grounded in the works of two renowned Russian Formalists, Jan Mukarovsky and Victor Shklovsky who theorised the form and function of creative language in literature. The most influential aspects of foregrounding theory are its account on defamiliarisation process of literary reading, text interpretation and literary values (Picken, 2007, p. 18). Shklovsky proposes that literary language makes 'the stone *stony*', reflecting how figurative and poetic language in literature can provide refreshing perception to habitual, automatic human experience. For example, literary devices like rhyme and alliteration, metaphor or metonym, are textual or stylistic features that "deviate from the linguistic norm" or "make strange" the language as to "draw attention to itself" (Simpson, 2004) hence slowing down normal reading to allow readers focus and perceive things with freshness' (Picken, 2007, p.17). A similar account by Mukarovsky suggests that the consistent and systematic patterns of creative language in literature 'foreground' particular meaning relationships which subsequently facilitate readers' interpretation of text. In sum, both theorists acknowledge that a literary text has certain formal, linguistic or stylistic features which are 'foregrounded' for a purpose to attract readers to its meanings. More recently, works by several researchers have further expanded this theory by proposing that these 'foregrounded' features elicit or evoke in readers affective-oriented response (Miall 1988, 1989, Miall and

Kuiken, 1994) as readers focus on the images, themes and characters made prominent in the story through stylistically-enriched narration which subsequently stimulates "both effect and affect in a text's interpretation" (Simpson, 2004, p.50).

Aesthetic responses are also directed to the works of literature itself as a whole and these might include feeling of appreciation or admiration to its style or crafts (Oatley, 1994). When readers focus and respond to foregrounding, they are directed to 'deeper' understanding of the story, its subtle nuance and artistic creation as literary devices add "richness to stories" (Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown, 2007, p.177) besides presenting intricate and complex meanings which are not normally expressed in ordinary language (Miall and Kuiken 1994). Hence an ability to recognise and respond to the *artistic* creation in a text may lead to developing *aesthetic* responses in the reader. Numerous studies prove that reader responses to literary texts are partly motivated by specific structural or formal features of the texts, or *foregrounding* (Vipond and Hunt, 1984; van Peer, 1986; Dixon et al., 1993; Miall and Kuiken,1994; Hakemulder, 2004; Fialho, 2007; Zyngier et al., 2007).

B. Transactional Theory of Literary Reading

In addition to aesthetic responses evoked by foregrounding, responses may also be triggered when readers 'transact' with the text through the elements of the story world such as characters, events or/and settings. In other words, *narrative* responses (Oatley 1994; Miall and Kuiken, 2002) or *fictional* responses (Dijkstra et al., 1994) are evoked in readers as they reflect their personal memories, experiences or feelings with regard to the character's predicament, the events or the settings mentioned in the story. Not only does such personal involvement capture the reader's attention (Louwerse and Kuiken, 2004) but it can also affect his or her self-perception after reading the story (Kuiken, Miall and Sikora, 2004).The evocation of reader responses through reading literature reflects Rosenblatt's (1978, p.25) ideas of " poetic experience" during which "the reader's attention is centred directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text". In other words, rather than merely recognizing plots and characters, readers *experience* the character's attitude or feelings and attend to the plot by developing "attitudes, a sense of the tone and character of the narrative persona" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.38). During literary reading, the text activates "elements of the reader's past experience both with literature and with life" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.11) and consequently evokes in readers certain images, feelings, attitudes, associations and ideas (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.10).

C. Application of Foregrounding and Transactional Theories

Based on the two theories mentioned, this exploratory study set out to investigate how readers responded to; (1) the foregrounded elements in a story and, (2) the story world involving characters, events or/and settings presented in the story. To further specify the components of the responses, three categories are established based on theoretical accounts and empirical findings from previous research. The three

categories of responses are; (a) the *aesthetic* - triggered by foregrounding (b) the *narrative* - activated by the event, character or/and setting in the story and (c) the *evaluative* - reflecting readers' judgement or appreciation towards the form or structure of the text itself or/and to the reading experience as a whole (Miall, 1989; Cupchik, 1994; Cupchik, Oatley and Vorderer, 1998; Kneepkens and Zwaan, 1994; Oatley, 1994; Miall and Kuiken, 1999). Fig.1 summarises the conceptual framework for reader response components used in this study based on previous research findings by Miall (1989), Cupchik, Oatley and Vorderer, (1998), Kneepkens and Zwaan (1994), and Oatley (1994).
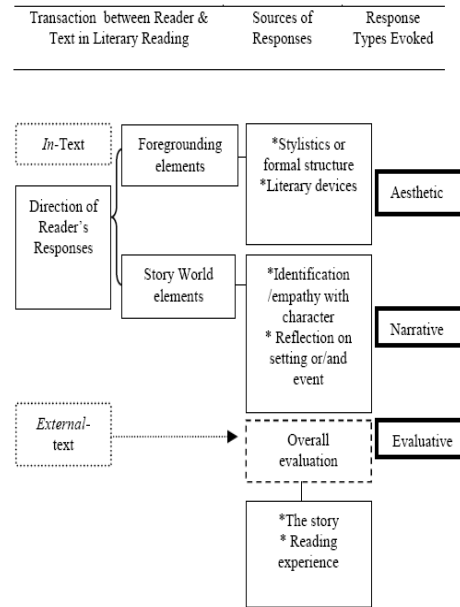

Fig. 1. Summarises the direction of reader response and the response categories established based on previous research findings by Miall (1989), Cupchik et al. (1998), Kneepkens and Zwaan (1994), and Oatley (1994).

III. THE STUDY

Participants were twenty-four secondary school students aged sixteen from one school in Selangor, Malaysia. They were homogeneous in terms of religion, race and native language but categorised into high and low proficient users of English based on the school placement test. In the study, the participants were instructed to identify literary devices in the text through underlining the relevant phrases. The literary devices were pre-determined based on discussion among three experienced teachers. After the identification task, the participants had to write their responses (in English or their mother tongue) to the story by imagining themselves being in the character's place (empathising with the character) or by describing their feelings, thoughts or memories (self-reflection).

The short story, *Oranges in The Sun* by Yahya bin Salam al-Mundhri (2008), contains 724 words and it revolves around one male protagonist's attempt to cross a busy road under the hot sun. He is carrying a small sack of oranges to be brought back to his children who eagerly wait for his return. His attempt to cross the busy and dangerous road is made even more difficult by the fact that his left leg is crippled from a previous road accident. The climax of the story is that the man successfully crosses the road after much trepidation

only to discover that he has left the oranges behind!

In the text, there is a repetition of the phrase *Everything is ruled by the sun* that serves to foreground the association between the scorching sun and the predicament of the main character. In addition to repetition, there are also similes and personification which also highlight the hot sun and the challenge the main character is facing. All these foregrounded features present a coherent description of the physical setting to complement the hardship the main character is experiencing. Readers who can identify and understand this portrayal may engage well with the story especially through empathy with the main character.

With regard to data analysis, participants' correct identification of literary devices was obtained and their written comments were also analysed and coded based on the *aesthetic-narrative-evaluative* categories previously explained. It could be hypothesised that participants who engaged well with the story would be able to identify the foregrounded features and emphatise with the main character's situation.

IV. FINDINGS

High proficient L2 readers scored better in identifying the literary devices used in the text compared to low proficient readers who highlighted ordinary words or phrases (lacking in literariness). This finding supports Brumfit's (1989, p.27) suggestion that "response to and in literature seems possible only after students have acquired certain level of linguistic mastery. Stated differently, L2 readers' engagement with a literary text to an extent is influenced by their L2 proficiency which enables them to discern literariness in a text.

TABLE I: EXAMPLES OF SOME WRITTEN RESPONSE

Empathy with character	Identification with character	Evaluative comments
He felt very regretful with his carelessness and fear. (STUDENT A)	I feel happy as I can cross the road by myself but I feel disappointed as I can't bring oranges to my children. (STUDENT C)	I understand the excerpt but a few words I don't understand. (STUDENT E)
He tried the best to cross the road and finally he did it. He felt very happy as he could go home. But, he felt disappointed and sad. The sack of oranges was left behind. He couldn't cross the road again as the road was busy. He went home full of sorrow. (STUDENT B)	I am really sad. My feet are painful and I'm disabled, so I left the oranges for the children. If it were me, I would cross back and take the oranges. (STUDENT D)	What great pain and shame. The hard work and facing all those trauma ends up with nothing. Life is like that. When you try, you will have two endings. It's either victory or failure. You can't blame life or fate. That's what it's supposed to be. (STUDENT F)

On the comments written by the participants, more high proficient readers wrote comments that reflect critical and in-depth understanding of the story which incorporate the aesthetic, narrative and evaluative aspects. On the other hand, low proficient readers were more focused on the narrative aspect of the story (character and event). However in general, the predominant response type for both high and low proficient readers is inclined toward the narrative aspect of the story hence suggesting that engagement is merely at the

'surface' rather than at a 'deeper', aesthetic level. Stated differently, the majority of the participants engaged well with the event in the story as reflected by their empathy with the main character. There were fewer comments on how the literary devices contributed to the overall message of the story. Some examples of participants' written comments are displayed in Table I.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Limitations

In carrying out this preliminary study, there were several limitations identified which would be duly addressed during the actual implementation of the study. Only written responses were elicited and analysed since the study was intended to be exploratory. However future in-depth study may include verbal protocol and interview for data collection to investigate both the process and product of literary reading. In this study, the time allocated for data collection, which was after the final examination and prior to the year-end school holidays may have influenced students' motivation level to a certain extent. In addition, students were allocated only one hour to complete the task and this may also restrict responses elicited in the students. However, the allowance for responses to be written either in English or the native language Malay probably compensated for the short duration. Future research may yield more conclusive findings from more rigorous data collection and analysis in addition to consideration given on the gender effect and sample size.

B. Conclusion

Results from previous empirical research show that literary reading can elicit responses in readers through; (a) certain foregrounded, textual patterns in the text or known as foregrounding, and/or (b) the story world which is made up of character, event and setting. In the context of this study which involves L2 literary text and secondary school readers, it has also been discovered that the responses elicited did reflect the components established by previous research in L1 context which mostly involved university students. Despite the small sample size, the findings do corroborate certain aspects of previous studies for instance the ability to identify literary devices, empathy and identification with the main character especially among high proficient L2 readers.

The pedagogical significance of investigating L2 reader responses is that it could provide teachers of literature with better understanding on how their students engage with text in addition to creating a constructive view of student readers whose responses are given due attention and acknowledgement. In addition, though both aesthetic and narrative response types are important for reader engagement, it is the aesthetic-oriented responses which may lead to a more satisfactory and in-depth reading experience. Hence in the context of L2 classroom, while understanding the story world is a pre-requisite to enjoying the text, it may also be beneficial for teachers to highlight to students how literary devices can further enrich their reading and understanding of the story. As a conclusion, more future research on aesthetic responses in L2 readers should be carried out towards

creating an enjoyable and meaningful literary reading experience that can benefit the readers personally and linguistically.

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