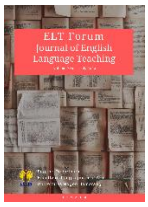
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Enhancing Students' Understanding to Literary Works Through Reader Response Approach

Maria Johana Ari Widayanti[✉1], Mohamad Ikhwan Rosyidi[1], Prayudias Margawati[1]

[1]Sastra Inggris, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Jawa Tengah

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Abstract

When students in Critical Reading class are able to follow a story quite well, they may still hesitate to explain what its meaning from their own perspectives. Herewith, the aim of Reader Response Approach was used to provide students with more opportunities to incorporate their experiences, questions, and personal reactions into literary reading were included some principles in course planning, classroom activities, and assessment, particularly when students explored social values presented in the stories. A qualitative case study was conducted using data from interviews, questionnaires, classroom observations, video recordings, lesson plans, and students' written work. Students began by making predictions and asking questions. They then identified important passages, organized ideas, summarized the story, and reflected on what they had read. Their answers gradually moved beyond simply naming characters or identifying themes. They began to explain the reasons behind the characters' decisions, connect events in the story with familiar situations, and use textual details to support their views. Social values such as friendship, cooperation, and solidarity also became easier to discuss when students connected these ideas to experiences with everyday life. Personal reactions were not treated as simple opinions; instead, students were encouraged to return to the text and reconsider the reason behind their particular view. The classroom experience suggests that reader-response learning can make literary reading more personal while still encouraging students to engage closely and critically with the text.

✉Correspondence Address:
B3 Building FBS Unnes
Sekaran, Gunungpati, Semarang, 50229
E-mail:mariawida@mail.unnes.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

In the Critical Reading class, students were generally able to tell who the characters were, what happened in the story, and what theme was being presented. The difficulties emerged when they were asked to explain why a particular theme mattered or what a character's actions meant. During the initial classroom observations, friendship, cooperation, and solidarity were among the values that students could recognize, but their explanations often stopped at simply identifying these values. Many students also tended to wait for the lecturer's guidance before developing an opinion of their own.

Various ideas on reading have offered different answers to this question. Earlier views tended to emphasize on skills such as decoding, identifying main ideas, and making inferences (Estates, 2016; Rani, 2016). Later perspectives placed greater attention on the relationship between the reader and the text. Mikulecky and Jeffries (2007), for example, associated meaningful reading with readers' personal experiences, while Harmer (2007) described pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading as ways to help learners work through a text. In literary reading, Rosenblatt's Reader Response Theory gives the reader a more prominent role in the formation of meaning. Knowledge, feelings, memories, and experiences become part of the reader's interaction with a literary work. Her distinction between efferent and aesthetic stances (Rosenblatt, 1993; 2018) further explains that readers may approach a text either to obtain information from it or to experience and respond to it. Classroom practices such as journals, discussions, and text transformation have likewise been used to encourage students to express their responses to literature (Iskhak et al., 2017; Mart, 2019b; Khatib & Farahian, 2013).

What remains less clear in the existing discussion is what happens when these reader-response activities are integrated into the course itself. Reading strategies, personal responses, lesson planning, and assessment are often treated as separate components. Research in EFL settings has commonly focused on vocabulary, motivation, or reading comprehension, while students' own backgrounds and experiences have received less attention when literary meaning is discussed. A similar issue appears in work on social values in literature. Friendship, cooperation, and solidarity may be identified as themes, but there is less explanation of how students develop an understanding of these values while reading and discussing a story in a Critical Reading class.

The classroom practice developed in this study brings these elements together. Students first examined a text, made predictions, and raised questions. Next step is called during reading. In this activity, students marked important passages and organized information they considered important. Afterward, they summarized the story and reflected on what its characters, events, and themes meant to them. Their personal experiences were welcomed as part of the discussion, but they were also encouraged to return to the text when explaining their ideas. Course planning and assessment followed the same direction, allowing students' responses to be traced from their initial impressions to their later explanations.

Moreover, the discussion focuses on how Reader Response Approach was implemented in a higher education, especially in Critical Reading course and what happened to students' understanding of literary works as they engaged with these activities. Particular attention is given to the roles of personal experience, textual evidence, classroom discussion, and reflection in students' interpretation of social values.

METHODS

The classroom served as the main setting for examining how Reader Response Theory was implemented in the Critical Reading course. The researcher examined three aspects that students encountered during the course: what had been prepared in the syllabus, what occurred as they worked with literary texts, and how their work was later evaluated. These aspects were examined together through the constructive alignment idea of Biggs and Tang (2011), while Rosenblatt's perspective on reading was used to explain how students formed meanings through their interactions with the texts (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Lessons were observed as they naturally occurred in the classroom. The researcher focused on how students responded to the texts, how the lecturer guided classroom discussions, and how students engaged in the reading activities (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Interviews were conducted to obtain accounts of the classroom experience from both students and the lecturer. Lesson plans, observation notes, and students' written work were also collected. The data were read repeatedly, with similar responses and classroom events placed together. Themes were then

developed through the coding procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Information from one source was compared with information from the other sources to determine whether similar classroom experiences appeared in different forms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The classroom records demonstrated how reader response became part of students' everyday engagement with literary texts. The discussion begins with what was included in the course plan, then examines what students actually did before, during, and after reading. It then considers how their responses were assessed and what changes occurred in the way they explained literary works and the social values represented in them.

Integration of the Reader Response Approach in Instructional Design

Students' ideas were not limited to a single reading activity. They were already considered from the initial course-planning stage and continued to appear in the tasks students completed in class and in their written work. As a result, their responses to the stories part of the lessons from beginning to end.

The stories used in class often depicted people helping one another, working together, or supporting a friend. These situations were familiar to the students, so a character's action could quickly lead to a personal example. A student might share experience of friendship or describe a situation in which working with others did not go as smoothly as expected. From there, the class could start discussing why a character made a particular choice.

At the beginning of a lesson, the title or opening lines of a story were often sufficient to get students guessing or making predictions. They shared what they thought might happen and raised questions they wanted the story to answer. During reading, students marked passages that caught their attention and wrote brief notes about the characters or events. They returned to these notes when summarizing the story or trying to explain what they thought about it. In some cases, details they discovered later caused them to reconsider and to look differently at something they had initially believed.

Students did not always agree about the characters. One student might defend a character's decision, while another might consider the same decision to be a mistake. Students were therefore required to return to the text and identify the passages that supported their responses.

These different opinions were also reflected in the written assignments. Students were not required to reach the same conclusion. Instead, they were expected to explain their thinking clearly and identify which part of the story had led them their explanation. In this way, students were able to interpret the same story differently while maintaining a clear connection to the text.

This finding distinguishes the present study from research that positions reader response mainly in activities such as journals or classroom discussions. In this study, students' responses were visible from course planning stage through evaluation process. The approach consequently functioned as an integral part of the course structure rather than as an additional activity attached to conventional reading instruction. Taken together, the classroom evidence suggests that personal engagement becomes more productive when students are required to examine textual details, organize their thoughts, and explain the basis of their readings. In this context, the Reader Response Approach consequently served not only to elicit students' reactions but also to transform those reactions into reasoned interpretations of literary works.

Assessment as a Tool for Interpreting Literary Understanding

Students were assessed through three activities: previewing and questioning, annotating and outlining, and reviewing, summarizing, and reflecting. These activities followed the process through which students engaged with a literary text, beginning with their initial thoughts and ending with their personal conclusions. Thus, students did not wait until the end of the lesson to be assessed. Their thinking could be observed as they read, made notes, and develop their responses.

During previewing and questioning, students shared what they expected to find in the story and raised questions based on the information they had before reading it in full. The lecturer did not focus primarily on whether their predictions correct right or wrong. Instead, attention was given to whether students could ask relevant questions and explain what made them curious about the text. The questions students raised at the beginning of the lesson provided a small picture of what students already knew about the topic. Once they began reading, students marked sentences that

caught their attention, wrote brief notes, and grouped related ideas. When a student, for example, stated that a character was kind, the discussion often returned to the story: "Which part made you think that?" Students then searched for the scene or action that supported their response.

After finishing the story, they looked at their notes again. Some might write any important occurrence, while others focused on characters' actions that stayed in their minds They also wrote about friendship, cooperation, or solidarity that reminded them of something they had experienced with friends or classmates. A few students even reconsidered their first opinion about a specific character after understanding more about the situation in the story.

The rubric gave the lecturer a few things to pay attention to when reading the students' work. Students did not need to give the same answer. They simply had to make their thoughts understandable, keep the explanation connected, and show which part of the story had influenced their view. Different opinions could still make sense when students could explain what their opinion briefly.

Bist and Kandel (2024) found that interpretive assessment can help students feel more confident and motivated. The same kind of change could be noticed here. Some students changed an early answer or opinion after discovering something new in the story, while others became more certain about an idea because they found the stronger reason.

By the end, their answer was not just a summary of the story. It also showed the little steps behind their understanding—the questions they had, the parts they noticed, the opinions they changed, and the reasons they finally chose to keep.

Reader Response Approach and Students' Meaning-Making Process

Students' understanding developed through several encounters with the literary work. Their first contact began with the title, cover, and opening information, which became clues for making predictions and raising questions. Some students related these clues to experiences they had encountered in everyday life. Their early comments were not always detailed, yet they gave students a reason to become curious about the story and its possible direction.

As the reading continued, students worked with particular parts of the story rather than discussing it only in general terms. They marked passages, recorded actions performed by characters, and grouped related points in simple outlines. These activities encouraged them to check their opinions against the author's words. When an idea could not be linked to a particular passage, students had to reconsider or revise it. Reading consequently involved a process of checking and reshaping their first impressions.

Once the story had been completed, students revisited the important points they had collected. When students wrote their summaries, they chose the parts of the story that they thought were worth remembering. They did not try to repeat everything what happened. During the reflection, some talked about friendship, cooperation, or solidarity because those things reminded them of people or situations they knew.

Their initial predictions could change as they progressed through the reading. A character might act differently from what they expected, or a new event might cause an earlier idea to seem wrong. The brief notes they made while reading helped them recall these moments when they developed their final answers.

Students also brought pieces of their own lives into the discussion. A character's decision might remind them of something that had happened with a friend or classmate. Another scene might lead them to think about what they would have done in a similar situation. These experiences helped them explain why a certain part of the story was meaningful to them.

At the same time, they were expected to connect those personal responses to specific details from the text. This combination gave students the freedom to express their individual perspectives without separating those perspectives from the content they had read.

The pattern also supports the finding of Iskhak et al. (2017), who found that reader-response journals helped learners express their views of literature, and Mart (2019b), who associated transactional reading with emotional involvement and analytical engagement. The present classroom experience adds a sequence in which initial predictions, closes attention to textual details, and later reflection contributes to the formation of a more developed response.

For Critical Reading class, this sequence provides learners with a concrete pathway for developing their own understanding. They begin by asking what a story might mean, examine the clues provided by the text, and then reconsider their ideas after completing the reading. Literary

comprehension consequently becomes a personal process while still requiring careful attention to what the author has presented.

Assessment as a Tool for Interpreting Literary Understanding

Three classroom tasks were used to examine how students responded to the literary works: previewing and questioning, annotating and outlining, and reviewing, summarizing, and reflecting. Each task captured a different aspect of students' engagement with the story. Their initial questions showed what they expected, their notes revealed what caught their attention, and their final reflections demonstrated how they understood the work after reading it.

Before reading, students were invited to examine the available clues and discuss about what they thought the story might contain. They looked at the title, cover, or opening lines and shared their ideas about what the story might be about. They predicted what might happen, discussed the characters, and raised questions. Though the prediction did not have to be correct, it simply provided them a starting point for reading and something students could reconsider as the story unfolded.

During reading, students marked passages that caught their attention and wrote brief notes about character actions or important events. When they wanted to explain an opinion, they returned to the passage that had triggered their thinking. For example, rather than simply stating that a character was helpful, they could point to a specific action in the story that led them see the character that way.

After finishing the story, students revisited the notes they had made and wrote about the parts they remembered most. Some students wrote about their own experience to related friendship, cooperation, or solidarity to things with friends or classmates. Others wrote about a character's decision and asked themselves whether they would have done the same thing. Their answers were assessed based on how they explained their thoughts, how the ideas were logically connected, and which parts of the story they used to support their response.

There was no single answer that all students were expected to reach. A student could disagree with a classmate as long as they could explain why and identify something in the story that had shaped their opinion. This allowed personal responses in the discussion without allowing the text disappear from the conversation.

Bist and Kandel (2024) noted that interpretive assessment can help students feel more confident and motivated. A similar pattern could be observed in the students' work in this study. Predictions made before reading sometimes changed after a new event shifted their understanding of the story. An opinion could also become stronger when students found a passage that supported it. In some cases, a character whom students initially disliked was viewed differently after they gained better understanding of the character's situation.

By the end, students' writing contained more than a retelling of the plot. It showed which moments had remained meaningful to them, what changed them or maintain an opinion, and why they finally understood the story in a particular way.

Understanding Social Values Through Literary Texts

While discussing the stories, students often paused at the characters' actions and began to ask what those actions meant. When a character helped a friend or worked together with others, students discussed whether the choice was genuinely helpful and what might have happened if the character had made a different choice.

Some scenes reminded students of experiences from their own lives. A conflict between two characters could lead to a story about friendship, while a group situation might remind them of working with classmates. Students began discussing about friendship, cooperation, and solidarity in their own way. Rather than simply saying that a story contained these values, they discussed what those values meant to them and how they could recognize them in the characters' actions.

The class did not always have the same conclusions. One student might view a character's action as an example of solidarity, while another might disagree. Hearing a different view sometimes encourage a student to maintain their original opinion, but sometimes it made them reconsider their response.

After the discussion, students wrote about what stayed with them. Some wrote about a character they liked, questioned, or disagreed with, while others focused on a scene that reminded

them of something in their own lives. Their reflections showed which parts of the story had actually made them think.

The stories therefore became a starting point for students to discuss experiences they had actually encountered outside the classroom. Friendship, cooperation, and solidarity were no longer merely words attached to a theme; students could recognize them through characters' choices and compare those choices with their own lives.

Reliability of Findings in Addressing Research Problems

The syllabus and lesson plans provided an idea of what the lecturer had prepared for the Critical Reading class. What occurred during the lessons then be examined through classroom observations, students' notes, questionnaires, and their completed assignments. Assessment records provided information about how students' work was evaluated throughout the course.

In class, students worked through a series of previewing, questioning, annotating, outlining, summarizing, and reflecting. At first, their notes were often simple, such as pointing out an event, a character, or a part of the story that caught their attention. As they continued reading, those small brief notes became useful when they attempted to explain what they thought about the story.

Their way of discussing about the texts also became more detailed overtime. Early responses mainly involved retelling events or identifying characters. Later, students began asking why a character behaved in a particular way, what an event might suggest, and how friendship, cooperation, or solidarity appeared in the story. Some students also drew on their personal experiences to explain why they viewed a character or situation in a certain way.

The rubric provided the lecturer with a straightforward way to handle the different responses. Students were not required to agree with one another. They only needed to explain what they meant and identify the part of the story had led them to their response. Their notes and assignments also made it easier to observe how their thinking developed as the reading activities went on.

Table 1 shows what students did at each point of the reading activities.

Table 1. Students' Interpretive Focus Across Instructional Stages

Instructional Stage	Dominant Student Response	Interpretive Focus
Before Reading	Previewing, questioning	Prediction, expectation, personal association
During Reading	Annotating, outlining	Identification of key events, characters, and theme
After Reading	Reviewing, summarizing, reflecting Data 8	Interpretation of social values and personal meaning

The table shows a change in the way students engaged with the stories. At the beginning, most of their attention was focused on what might happen and what they expected to find. During reading, their attention became more focused on particular scenes, characters, and details that caught their interest. After finishing the story, their responses developed further as they began to explain what those details meant to them.

The changes were not the same for every student. Some maintained their initial ideas until the end, while others changed their views after discovering something new in the story. A few also connected events in the story with experiences from their own lives. This made the three activities different from one another: the first gave students something to wonder about, the second encouraged them to look more closely, and the final activity gave them time to reflect on what they

had read. When explaining their ideas, some students drew on their personal experiences. They also began referring to specific lines or events in the text when asked questions such as, "Why do you think so?"

The three activities were had already been included into the lesson plans before the classes began. During the lessons, students worked through them by asking questions, taking notes, discussing ideas, and writing their responses. Their assignments showed what they were eventually able to articulate in writing, while the questionnaires and assessment records provided additional information about how they experienced the activities. When the work was assessed, students were not required to agree with one another. They simply needed to explain their ideas and show what in the story had led them there.

There was no need for the lecturer to provide the meaning of the story at the beginning. Some students had time to make predictions, discover something that changed their initial views, and come back with a different explanation at the end. Table 1 shows how students' work differed across the three reading activities.

Overall Contribution

Students were not given a fixed meaning for the stories. They could begin with a question, a personal reaction, or an experience, then return to the text to determine whether their ideas were supported. When a passage supported their response, they used it to explain their thinking; when it did not, they reconsidered their initial impression.

The Reader Response Approach was also integrated into the lesson plans, reading activities, and assessment. Students were free to develop different opinions, but they were still expected to explain the basis of their opinions and identify where those opinions came from.

Friendship, cooperation, and solidarity became easier to discuss when students connected the characters' actions with situations they had experienced or observed around them. Thus, a simple event in a story could lead to a more personal discussion about how people treat and respond to one another.

Information from course documents, classroom observations, students' work, questionnaires, and assessment records helped capture these changes from different perspectives. Future research could examine whether similar results appear with other literary genres, courses, or groups of students.

For Critical Reading classes, the practical implication is simple: students need the freedom to respond to a story, but they also need a basis for explaining their response. The Reader Response Approach can provide both by giving students space to express their views while encouraging them to support those views with evidence from the text.

CONCLUSION

The Reader Response Approach helped students approach literary works through their own ideas and experiences. In the Critical Reading class, students did not stop at identifying characters or retelling events. They began to discuss themes, question characters' decisions, and connect situations in the stories to things they were familiar from everyday life. Their explanations became clearer when they were encouraged to refer to specific parts of the text.

The activities of previewing, questioning, annotating, outlining, summarizing, and reflecting provided students with different ways of engaging with a story. These activities were integrated in the course plan and assessment, making responses to literature a regular part of classroom activities. Students were free to develop different opinions, but they were still required to explain why they held particular view and connect their ideas with the story.

When students submitted their work, they did not provide the same answer. One student might understand a character's action differently from another, and both could explain the reasoning behind their understanding. The lecturer considered how clearly each student expressed the idea, how logically they organized the explanation, and how effectively they referred to details from the story. Personal opinions were welcomed, but students were still required to show what in the story had led them to those opinions.

The stories also brought up experiences that students were familiar with from everyday life. While discussing the characters, they sometimes mentioned friendship problems, group work, or situations where someone helped another person. A scene involving cooperation might remind them of working with classmates, while a character standing by a friend could lead to a conversation

about what they would do in a similar situation. As a result, friendship, cooperation, and solidarity part of a meaningful classroom conversation rather than merely themes written on the board.

Students could therefore see that the ideas presented in a story were not limited to the fictional world. For a Critical Reading class, the Reader Response Approach can provide students both with freedom and direction. They can determine what a story means from their own perspective, while the reading activities and assessment encourage them to explain that view carefully.

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DECLARATION OF AI USE

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT to support brainstorming, develop preliminary outlines, and identify alternative wording and synonyms. Grammarly was used to check grammar and improve language accuracy. Mendeley was used for reference management and to organize and manage the references cited in the manuscript. All AI-assisted content and language suggestions were critically evaluated and revised by the authors.

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