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Transactional Reader Response and Foregrounding Theories in ESL Classroom

Khairul Husna Abdul Kadir*, Tengku Nor Rizan Tengku Mohamad Maasum, Ravinchandran Vengadasamy
National University of Malaysia, Bangi Selangor, 43600, Malaysia

Abstract
This study applies the Foregrounding Theory and Transactional Theory of Literary Reading in analysing and describing the responses of 24 ESL learners reading one L2 literary text. Learners responded by identifying literary devices (foregrounding) and commenting on the character and event (story world) of the narrative text. Findings revealed that high proficient ESL learners scored better in literary device identification. In responding to the story world, learners took up a spectator or participant role depending on the question type presented to them. The significance of the results is discussed followed by discussion on implications of the findings for future research.

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1. Introduction
The central thesis of this paper is the notion that literary texts evoke in readers some types of responses due to; first, the special formal, linguistic or stylistic features of the text or known as foregrounding, and second, the story world of fictional characters, events or settings. In other words, aesthetic responses in reading literature are derived from readers’ identification of the literary devices or foregrounded elements in the text as well as their reflection on and/or identification with the settings, events or characters portrayed in the story world. Hence these two fundamental ideas of foregrounding and transactional reader response provide the point of departure for conducting a study contextualised in the Malaysian context involving ESL learners.

Furthermore the significance of investigating reader response in Malaysian literature classroom is motivated by two reasons; (a) The learning outcomes for literature lessons clearly state language for aesthetic use hence strongly suggesting the creation of aesthetic reading experience for L2 learners, (b) Most studies on reader response are situated in the L1 context hence exploring ESL learners’ responses in reading L2 literary texts may yield fresh findings and insights due to proficiency levels.

Therefore this study set out to investigate responses of ESL learners using theoretical frameworks of foregrounding and transactional reader response. The objectives of the study were; (a) to analyse and describe the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 6013-3580305, fax: 603-87360502.
E-mail address: khairuluhsna@hotmail.com

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ESL learners’ responses evoked by foregrounding and story world of an L2 text and, (b) to describe learners’ written responses based on the question types and also their proficiency levels.

1.1 Foregrounding Theory

Literary devices come under the concept of foregrounding, a reference to the textual or stylistic features that “deviate from the linguistic norm” or “make strange” the language as to “draw attention to itself” (Simpson, 2004). In other words, the presence of literary devices contributes to the ‘literariness’ of the texts hence attracting readers’ attention to linger on them. Some common literary devices are metaphor, simile, imagery, alliteration, assonance, repetition of key words or phrases, rhyme and meter. The presence of literary devices or foregrounded elements functions as an “important textual strategy for the development of images, themes and characters, and stimulates both effect and affect in a text’s interpretation” (Simpson, 2004:50). In other words, literary devices add “richness to stories” (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007:177) besides presenting intricate and complex meanings which are not normally expressed in ordinary language (Miall & Kuiken, 1994). More importantly, due to its ‘deviant’ features, it is theorised that, it is against foregrounded features that readers respond to.

Numerous studies prove that reader responses to literary texts are partly motivated by specific structural or formal features of the texts, or foregrounding (Vipond & Hunt, 1984; van Peer, 1986; Dixon et al., 1993; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Hakemulder, 2004; Fialho, 2007; Zyngier et al., 2007).

Vipond and Hunt (1984) compared readers’ responses to two narratives; one with foregrounded elements in its discourse (unusual style), story (unusual plot elements) and telling (narrator’s unusual comments) and another version of the same story contained neutral statements. Their findings indicate that readers could respond more frequently to the foregrounded text compared to the normalised version. While in a study by Van Peer (1986), readers were asked to rate for the foregrounded elements in six poems and the findings indicate a strong correlation between students’ ratings for strikingness with the presence of foregrounding. More interestingly, the same effect was elicited from both novice and experienced readers, indicating how distinctive form of language (foregrounded features) stands out and is noticed by readers regardless of their literary competence. Miall and Kuken (1994) replicated van Peer’s (1986) study by using three modernist short stories instead of poems. Readers were also asked to rate segments they considered striking and to state whether or not such segments evoked their feelings. The findings also corroborate van Peer’s in a way that segments rated as striking received more reports of feelings from the participants.

In a more grand scale study involving three hundred participants from the University of Rio de Janeiro, Zyngier et al. (2007) used six versions of one line of a poem; from the original version (most foregrounded) to the sixth version of the same line but which had been neutralised or normalised (least foregrounded). It was discovered that the more foregrounded the line, the higher the readers’ scores on aesthetic appreciation and evaluation hence partly supporting the link between foregrounding and reader responses. Findings from another study by Fialho (2007) also corroborate Zyngier et al.’s (2007). In this study, Fialho (2007) instructed students from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro to read one short story and comment on segments of the story that triggered their emotional responses.

In general, all these studies were done in English-speaking countries involving native speakers reading English literary texts mostly of canonical status by Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce to name a few. Besides, most participants involved were university or college students. For data collection, most studies incorporated quantitative methods involving identifying foregrounding by rating or underlining the segments followed by writing comments evoked by the segments identified. The results obtained from the research conducted within these contexts have demonstrated the participants’ ability to identify foregrounding and then write about what the foregrounding evoked in them. Therefore as an extension to a new ground, the present study involved school-going students aged 16 years old who learn English as a second language and read English literature texts as part of the English lessons. It would be interesting to discover whether the findings corroborate results from the previous research. Nevertheless since this study was intended to be exploratory in nature, a small sample size, limited research instrument and less rigorous data analysis were employed. Therefore interpretations of results were strictly confined within the context of this exploratory study.
1.2 Transactional reader response theory

In addition to responses evoked by foregrounding in literary texts, responses may also be triggered when readers ‘transact’ with the text, living through the reading experience by attending to his own feelings, memories or images that the text evokes. This notion originates from Rosenblatt (1978:25), who proposes reading literary texts as “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: 38). During literary reading, the text activates “elements of the reader’s past experience both with literature and with life” (Rosenblatt, 1978:11) and consequently evoke in readers certain images, feelings, attitudes, associations and ideas (Rosenblatt, 1978:10).

There are some empirical studies that examine types of responses evoked during readers’ transaction with literary texts (Miall, 1989; Cupchik, 1994; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Oatley, 1994; Cupchik et al., 1998; Miall & Kuiken, 1999). Miall & Kuiken (2002) categorise types of responses into four domains of feeling which are evaluative, narrative, aesthetic and self-modifying. Evaluative responses relate to readers’ overall evaluation of reading the story (enjoyment, satisfaction of pleasure), narrative responses refer to the fictional event, character or setting, aesthetic responses are elicited by the literary elements in the text and finally, self-modifying feelings are feelings that relate to changes in readers’ sense of self, developed through their understanding of the story (Miall & Kuiken, 2002).

Dijkstra et al. (1994) study character emotions which occur in the fictional world, and reader emotions that reside outside the story world. Reader emotions can further be specified into fictional; responses elicited by the story world; and artefact; responses evoked by the structure, style or composition of the story (Dijkstra et al., 1994). Both fictional and artefact responses are parallel with narrative and aesthetic responses mentioned by Miall & Kuiken (2002) or Oatley’s (1994) narrative and aesthetic emotions.

In his taxonomy of emotion, Oatley (1994) proposes two types of emotional response elicited in readers from their interaction with the narrative world; (a) the aesthetic emotion directed to the works of literature itself as a whole which might include feeling of appreciation or admiration to its style or crafts, and (b) the narrative emotion elicited when readers enter into the narrative world or the story world. In his follow-up research Oatley (2004) further divides the narrative emotion into five elements; (a) emotions of identification, (b) sympathy, (c) empathy, (d) refreshed and, (d) remembered emotions.

In a similar vein, Louwerse and Kuiken (2004) studied personal involvement during which “readers may become captured by a literary text” (2004: 169). Their discussion highlights how the setting, characters and events in the narrative world besides the stylistic devices present in the text, may influence readers’ personal involvement. While a study by Kuiken et al. (2004) on reader identification with characters indicates that readers who linked the narrative world to their own personal experiences or identified with the character/s in the story, were more likely to report change of self-perception after reading. They further suggested that those readers were also known to be more open to experience as measured from the high score in the personality test.

1.2.1 Sources of responses: story world and the text as work of art

The primary focus grounded in the studies of foregrounding and reader response is that reader responses can be evoked by; (a) the elements of the story world such as characters, events or settings, and (b) by the text itself which might be admired for its structure, style or composition work. In other words, reader responses can be internal, with regard to the story world or be external, as related to aspects other than the story. The internal responses are known as narrative emotions or fictional responses while the external is referred to as aesthetic emotion or artefact responses (Oatley, 1994).

Based on these categories, it is proposed that readers can be guided to respond to the character in the story by identifying or empathising with him or her (Kuiken et al., 2004), or through readers’ personal involvement by reflecting on the settings or events portrayed in the story (Louwerse & Kuiken, 2004).

Hence a study on identifying reader responses can be compared against these three established categories; (a) character identification or empathy, (b) self-reflection triggered by the event or setting in the story and (c) evaluation, judgement or appreciation directed towards the form or structure of the text itself or/and to the experience of reading the text or evaluative responses (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). In other words these three categories from previous empirical studies can be adapted to form the established framework within which an investigation on reader responses can be situated as shown in Figure 1.
2. METHODOLOGY

This study applies quantitative, descriptive design to investigate responses of ESL learners using theoretical frameworks of foregrounding and transactional reader response. Hence data collection involved participants’ correct scoring in the identification of foregrounding and also their written comments which would be categorised into types of responses evoked.

2.1 Participants

The participants were 24 secondary students from one school in Selangor, Malaysia. The group was homogeneous in terms of linguistic, racial and religious background. In term of proficiency levels, these students scored Grade A for English subject in the Malaysian standardised Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR) but a school placement test further categorised them into two levels (low and high). For this study, students from both high and low proficiency levels were involved.

| TABLE 1 The background information on the participants |
|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Age        | 16 years old |
| Race       | Malay        |
| Religion   | Islam        |
| Sex        | Male 9, Female 15 |
| Native language | Malay      |
| 2010 Standardised English Exam | Grade A     |
2.2 Instrument

The data were participants’ responses in: (a) identifying literary devices in the text by underlining and, (b) writing comments based on the L2 story using either their native language (Malay) or English. For both tasks, one L2 short story segmented into five sections was used to elicit learners’ responses. 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 at crossing 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!

2.3 Procedures

The study was conducted at the end of school academic year after the participants finished their final examination prior to the year-end school holiday. They had all completed the English literature components consisting of two short stories and three poems. In this study, the participants were assigned to read the short story which was segmented into five sections, underline the literary device in each section and write their comments based on two types of question; either (a) as participant; imagine being in the character’s place and describe your feelings (empathy with character), or (b) as spectator; write about your thoughts, memories or feelings (self-reflection). Twelve students received a participant-oriented question while the remaining twelve would respond as spectators.

3. Results

The data obtained from the participants were: (a) the participants’ scores in underlining the correct foregrounded element in each segment of the story, and (b) the participants’ written comments based on empathy with character or the self-reflection type of question. In the first task, participants’ identification of foregrounding phrases in the story was compared against five literary devices or foregrounded elements which have been pre-determined by the researcher with the help of three experienced teachers (with more than 10 years teaching experience).

For the second task involving written responses, participants’ answers were analysed, coded and categorised based on the types of responses or ideas presented in the comments. The categories of comments are identified as the following; whether the comments reflect identification with character, empathy with the character or overall evaluation towards the story. These categories are established from findings of previous research (Miall, 1989; Cupchik, 1994; Cupchik et al., 1998; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Oatley, 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 1999).

3.1 Identification of foregrounding

More high proficient ESL learners are able to identify foregrounded literary devices used in the L2 text such as the personification and metaphor compared to low proficient learners, who mostly identified isolated words or phrases.

| Story segment | Pre-determined foregrounded statement | Literary device | Proficiency level |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
|               |                                       |                | High (n-12) | Low (n-12) |
| 1             | *Cars swallow the street, gritting their metallic teeth at the hesitant lame man who stands on the corner.* | Personification | 8 | 6 |
| 2             | *Cars swallow the road, chew the hot air, and spit out puffs of black smoke.* | Personification | 7 | 2 |
| 3             | *Drivers spit curses.*               | Metaphor       | 5 | 2 |
| 4             | *Cars windows are filled with blurred paintings of colored faces.* | Metaphor       | 7 | 3 |
| 5             | *It's as if he had put his foot in boiling water and recoiled in pain.* | Metaphor       | 7 | 5 |
In their written comments, the students’ responses are drawn by the event in the segment rather than by the literary device they have underlined. In other words, though some students were able to correctly identify all the five literary devices, most of their comments however were not evoked by the literary devices which were foregrounded. It may be presumed that a one-line literary device may not be as striking or evocative as the overall cohesiveness of the event or setting portrayed in each segment.

3.2 Engagement with text

Table 2 shows that more learners take on the role of spectator when asked to reflect on their personal memories, feelings or experience, compared to those learners who were required to empathise with the character. Stated differently, reader engagement with text may be maximised through empathising with the character in the story rather than merely reflecting on one’s personal experience or feeling.

Table 2 The overall assessment on ESL learners’ responses towards L2 narrative text.

| Reader engagement with text | Self-reflection- | Empathy with character- |
|-----------------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Role taken when reading     | Write about your thoughts, memories or feelings | Imagine being in the character’s place and describe your feelings |
| Spectator                   | (n-12)           | (n-12)                 |
| Spectator                   | 8                | 5                      |
| Participant                 | 4                | 0                      |
| Spectator                   | 5                | 7                      |
| Participant                 | 0                | 0                      |

3.3 Identification with character

Based on Table 2, all ESL learners who empathised with the character in the story, took on the participant role hence suggesting that only when readers identify with the character, can a participatory perspective be evoked hence leading to engagement with text.

3.4 Evaluative comments

Based on Table 2, the majority of the ESL learners did not comment about their overall judgment of or/and evaluation of the story. This partly supports the idea that evaluative responses tend to be elicited at the end of the reading experience itself indicating “the overall enjoyment, pleasure, or satisfaction of reading a short story” (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). However in this study, the participants read each story segment and wrote their comments hence their responses were elicited while reading. This may explain the reason for the lack of evaluative comments.

3.5 Examples of ESL learners’ written responses

Table 3 lists some examples of the ESL learners’ comments categorised into three groups; empathy with character, identification with character and evaluative comments. Identification with character is evident in the use of personal pronoun “I”. On the other hand, empathy with character is reflected in the use of third person pronoun “He” and description on his action as viewed by a spectator. Lastly, evaluative comments reflect readers’ personal opinions about the story or their overall experience of reading it.
4. Discussion

In this study, it can be suggested that ESL learners especially high proficient ones, demonstrated understanding of the tasks required of them; identifying literary devices (foregrounding) and expressing their personal comments based on the question presented. However, one central issue worth highlighting is that the ESL learners’ comments were not wholly elicited by the foregrounded elements they have identified. Instead, the comments were strongly related to the character or event that takes place in the story. Previous studies would instruct participants to identify foregrounding through underlining or rating task followed by a clear instruction for them to write on what these identified foregrounding elicit in them. Hence participants’ responses would have been confined to the underlined or rated foregrounded elements. In this study however, the participants were instructed to identify literary devices without further instruction on what these literary devices evoked in them. Given such instruction, it is then logical to suggest that the participants were more engaged by the story world; the character and event. Future studies may include clear instruction on foregrounding and how it affects ESL readers to evaluate whether the results corroborate research findings in the L1 context.
In terms of proficiency, high proficient ESL learners identified more correctly the literary devices in the story while low proficient ones chose ordinary words or phrases which they might deem difficult. Perhaps in the context of the study, the act of choosing difficult vocabulary over literary devices to a certain extent, reflect low proficient learners’ lack of literary competence. This is further proven when a comparison is made on the comments between high and low proficient learners; more high proficient learners wrote comments that reflect critical and in-depth understanding of the story. However extra caution is exercised in generalising these findings as the study involved very small ESL learners and the instrument is also rather limited. The correlation between proficiency levels and literary competence, should there be one, may warrant in-depth studies.

4.1 Limitations
In carrying out the study there were several limitations identified. The time selected to carry out the data collection, which was after the final examination and prior to the year-end school holidays may have influenced students’ motivation level. Besides, due to time constraint, 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 of the gender effect and sample size.

5. Conclusion
Overall, previous empirical research results show that literary reading elicits affective responses in readers caused by; (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 reading L2 literary text by ESL readers, it has been discovered that the responses elicited in them did reflect the components established by previous research in L1 context. Most L1 studies involved university participants but in this study, secondary students aged 16 were involved and despite the small sample size, overall results do corroborate certain aspects of previous studies i.e. ability to identify literary devices, empathise or identify with character.

In addition, responses from high proficient ESL learners, to an extent, reflect better mastery of literary concept compared to low proficient learners. However, such proposition is strictly confined within this study alone and more rigorous experimental studies may be conducted to support previous findings that suggest there are differences between expert and novice literature readers (Miall, 2002).

In terms of language proficiency, high proficient ESL learners identified more foregrounding in the story while low proficient ones chose ordinary words or phrases which they might consider difficult. Perhaps in the context of the study, the act of choosing difficult vocabulary over literary devices may indicate low proficient learners’ level of linguistic and literary competence which has yet to reach certain ‘permissible’ level for responding to literary texts. This is supported by Brumfit (1989:27) who proposes that “response to and in literature seems possible only after students have acquired certain level of linguistic mastery”. In other words, it may be suggested that to help ESL reader engage with L2 text, their general language proficiency must be upgraded.

In addition, comments from high proficient learners are also found to reflect critical and in-depth understanding of the story. However extra caution is exercised in generalising these findings as the study involved very small number of ESL learners and the instrument was also rather limited. The correlation between proficiency levels and literary competence may warrant future in-depth studies which involve bigger sample size and more combination and triangulation of methods and data.
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