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[Home](#)  
[Asian EFL Conference](#)  
[Conference Listings](#)  
[Editorial Board](#)  
[Hard Cover](#)  
[Introduction](#)  
[Special Editions](#)  
[Submissions](#)  
[Voices](#)

[Business Divisions](#)  
[TESOL Franchise](#)

| [March 2009 home](#) | [PDF Full Journal](#) | | [SWF](#) |

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 Article 1

**Title**

Issues and Insights for Promoting Agency, Voice and Subjecthood in Reading and Assessment

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**Bio Data:**

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**Abstract**

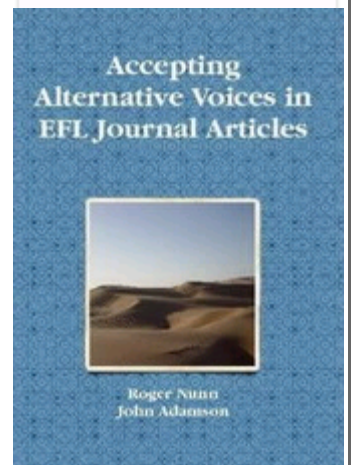
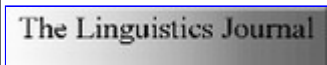
The paper invites teachers of reading to view response as a consequence of reading. By signposting a set of educational values and beliefs that underlie reading practices, the article urges the teachers of reading to factor in response in their assessment practices. It is believed that the theoretical issues and insights discussed in the article will strengthen the teachers' understanding of response-based assessment practices in EFL/ESL settings.

**Introduction**

At the outset, I wish to discuss the educational and social concerns that necessitate this study. It is hoped that the discussion will act as an awareness-building exercise and a point of departure for this research.

In an age that is characterized by a predominance of consumerism, electronic gadgetry, visual culture and information overload, reading appears to have declined as an educational practice. It saddens me to note that our university students read and write mainly in order to meet exam requirements and standards. As a result, they neither view reading as educating acts nor do they understand the sense of personal gratification it promotes. The current poverty of reading among our students points to the failure of

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[2008 Journals](#)  
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[2005 Journals](#)  
[2004 Journals](#)  
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[Book Reviews](#)  
[Indexes](#)  
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[Interviews](#)  
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a functional ability to read the world and their lives in a critical and inter-connected way (Alter, 1996; Freire and Macedo, 1987; Sivasubramaniam, 2004).

A cause and effect analysis of our students' inability to read the world and the word alerts us to the following issues: a) a system of teaching and learning which looks upon getting through exams as its primary goal; b) denial of space and initiative for thinking, emotional engagement, response and reaction in the language classroom; c) socialization into a process of reading and writing that rewards correct grammar and comprehension instead of individual response, expressive use of language and tentativeness in thinking; d) a normative orientation to testing and assessment which ignores the qualitative aspects of reading processes.

Having explained how and why our students find it demotivating to read and write, the analysis further serves to explain the likely consequences of our students' incapacity to read the world. When students read and write just because they need to pass exams and graduate, it is unlikely that they will appreciate the value of what they read and write. It is also likely that such a situation will influence them to view literacy as a mechanical acquisition of reading and writing skills. Consequently, literacy fails to transcend its literal meaning for want of a meaning that will emphasize its educational and social nature. In short, our students become casualties of 'a cultural ignorance and categorical stupidity crucial to the silencing of all potentially critical voices' (Giroux in Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 13).

It is argued that a mechanical acquisition of reading and writing skills does not presuppose that our students have acquired functional competencies in reading and writing. On the contrary, their mechanical acquisition of reading and writing skills points to a lack of capacity in them to understand how their world is affected by their reading and writing, and in turn how their reading and writing affect their world. In this respect, our students are illiterate even if they can read and write. This kind of illiteracy has far-reaching implications. It not only threatens the economic status of a society but also constitutes an injustice by preventing the illiterates from making decisions for themselves or from participating in the process of educational and social change. In short, it strikes at the foundations of democracy.

The issues and insights discussed so far can also help us understand the futility and unbeneficiality of reading research that has largely focused on referential meaning. Such a focus has entirely centred on bureaucratic efficiency aimed at a uniform curriculum for the majority of the students and a scheme of research and evaluation based on recalls, think-alouds, cloze texts and multiple-choice questions in standardized texts. The overriding normative orientation has over-emphasized referential meaning as a basis for assessing how well readers approximate an ideal or an appropriate response. Instructional approaches that articulate schema-theoretic and text grammar models of reading were only concerned with cognitive frameworks directed at correct comprehension of school-based texts for the entire reading population (Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal and Pearson, 2000). While it might be argued that such investigative assessments yield valuable information, they can be criticized for their limitations in approximating non-academic reading situations and their insensitivity to differences among readers. However, reading assessment practices in EFL/ESL settings appear to center on one right reading, correct comprehension and grammatical correctness. Such practices not only deny subjecthood to students but also reduce them to statistical entities on spreadsheets. This does not augur well for their future

educational development. Therefore, it is contingent upon us to view reading as a process of educational response and factor in response to reading as a mainstay in our reading assessment. A response-centered assessment of reading rejects the positivist notion that a text is a container of objective meaning and one, which can be marked correct or incorrect in any assessment. This is to suggest that the meanings constructed by the readers signpost 'the inferential processes of recovering prepositional attitudes and explicatures, deducing implicatures, trying out figurative interpretations, and creating a context in the attempt to make a text optimally relevant' (Mackenzie, 2002, p. 47). Thus, given their cultural backgrounds, their meanings and interpretations cannot be viewed as essentially incorrect.

### What is Reading?

Many of us read all the time and yet our reasons for reading and what we understand by 'read' and 'reading' are as diverse as the texts we read and the means with which we talk about them to others. Most of us are led by the assumption that reading is a skill, not quite unlike riding a bicycle, which has to be learnt at an early age and once we have learned how to do it, we simply do it without much thought, whenever we are called to do it. In this way, a common-sense definition of reading would be taking in information from a printed page (McCormick, 1994). A commonsensical definition of reading restricts reading to information transfer and, as Freire and Macedo (1987) observe, it does not intertwine with knowledge of the world but severs the dynamic link between language and reality. So reading, according to Freire (1972, 1973), would mean reading the world, perceiving the relationship between text and context. Freire points out that the texts, the words and the letters of the context of reading incarnate in a series of things, signs and objects, and perceiving these, should provide a basis for experience which in turn fosters a perceptual capacity in the reader.

In an attempt to examine the indestructible link between reading the word and the world, Freire (in Freire and Macedo, 1987, pp 30-31) observes:

The texts, words, letters of that context were incarnated in the song of the birds- -tanager, flycatcher, thrush- -in the dance of the boughs blown by the strong winds announcing storms; in the thunder and lightning; in the rain waters playing with geography, creating lakes, islands, rivers and streams. The texts, words, letters of that context were incarnated as well in the whistle of the wind, the clouds in the sky, the sky's color, its movement; in the color of foliage, the shape of leaves, the fragrance of flowers (roses, jasmine); in tree trunks; in fruit rinds (the varying color tones of the same fruit at different times - the green of a mango when the fruit is first forming, the green of a mango fully formed, the greenish-yellow of the same mango ripening, the black spots of an overripe mango the relationship among these colors, the developing fruit, its resistance to our manipulation and its taste). It was possibly at this time, by doing it myself and seeing others do it, that I learned the meaning of the verb to squash.

Viewed from this perspective, reading the world will always

precede reading the word and reading the word implies a continuous reading assessment of the world. In addition, reading the word is preceded by a certain way of writing it or rewriting it. This might be interpreted as a transforming process signifying the dynamics central to the literacy process.

Such a view comes close to Smith's (1983), which looks upon reading as an act that confers membership on the readers to the literacy club. The process of reading in that case rules out the need for: (a) reducing syntactical rules to diagrams (b) showing rules governing prepositions after specific verbs, agreement of gender and number contracting. On the contrary, all these will be opposed to the students' curiosity in a dynamic and living way so that the student would view these as objects to be discovered within the body of texts whether their own or those of established writers. If the students are asked to memorize the description of an object mechanically, their memorizing will not constitute knowledge of the object. That is why reading a text neither results in real reading nor in knowledge of the object to which the text refers (Freire and Macedo, 1987; McCormick, 1994).

Reading as an act of empowerment should provide the reader with access to a word universe that is, the readers' language used in his expression of his anxieties, fears, dreams and demands. This could be likened to a 'semiotic budget' (van Lier in Lantolf, 2000, p.252). The notion of semiotic budget is valuable to this paper as it encourages us to view our students' semiotic resources such as expressions of appreciation, empathy, understanding and host of other meaning making activities that represent their creative and critical thought. By strengthening the existential experience of the reader through a continuous development of his/her perceptive ability, it is possible to initiate an understanding of how culture as a form of human practice or work transforms the world. A reflective interpretation of the world will then be seen as an exercise in critical reading of reality. In sum, reading always entails critical perception, interpretation and an enthusiasm for reminding us of what has been read. I would, on the basis of this foregoing discussion, define reading as an act of empowering response which impacts on the reader, the text and the ensuing interaction between the text and the reader (Freire and Macedo, 1987; McCormick, 1994; Aebersold and Field, 1997).

What is response?

Reading specialists view response as a consequence of reading (Holland, 1968; Iser, 1978; Krashen, 1993; Langer, 1992; McCormick, 1994; Osborn, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1995; Smith, 1983). Thus, the term 'response' assumes prominence and substance in a context of reading. It implies any observable behaviour by a reader, which follows and is directly related to a specific act of reading. Such responses are unstructured and spontaneous. They can take many forms such as sighs, tears, laughter, re-reading, a personal recommendation, a book report, a verbal comment, a drawing or a dramatic presentation (Cairney, 1990).

Response is an indication of a process of engagement/involvement with a text. In other words it is a lived-through experience of a reader attempting to read (Rosenblatt, 1995). In light of this, it is not possible to quantify the reader's engagement with a text for the purpose of assessing reading objectively. The educational and the aesthetic value of response can only be understood and assessed impressionistically and qualitatively. Therefore, responses cannot and should not be likened to labelled consumer durables on a supermarket shelf (Sivasubramaniam,

2004).

In order to understand the centrality and primacy of response in the educational practice of reading, we need to attempt a comparison and contrast of cognitive and expressivist models of reading.

The Cognitive Model of the reading process has developed from cognitive psychology, which developed in the 1960s. The model relates reading to an 'access of word representations' and views decoding as a pivotal aspect of reading (McCormick, 1994, p. 14). Characterized by an objectivist tradition, the Cognitive Model, while stressing the importance of readers' prior knowledge, tends to overstate its usefulness in reading assessments. The objectivist tradition, which is guilty of excesses and over generalizations, as pointed out by Polanyi (1958), has in a way prevented the insights of readers' prior knowledge from moving beyond a measurable point. 'Schema Theory', which this model supports, needs to blend with culturally oriented concepts of reading. Otherwise, it will only result in pedagogical practices, which by disabling students from reading texts critically and from reading them with multiple perspectives, will serve to disempower them. Cognitive research, which claims to be able to quantify every aspect of the reading process, uses the computer as its main research tool and perhaps even as its writing metaphor. As Gardner (1985, p. 40) observes 'If a man-made machine can be said to reason, have goals, receive and revise behaviour, transform information and the like, human beings certainly deserve to be characterized in the same way'.

Such a perspective reduces reading to a hierarchy of skills and it is assumed that a reader must master a set of skills before he/she can advance to the next stage. The model points out the shift from a micro-level of letter and word recognition to the more complex thinking and comprehension abilities. The Cognitive Model has idealized the study of reading comprehension so that it could be taught effectively, on every level, word, sentence, paragraph, and text/story. Both expressivists such as Smith (1983) and Goodman (1988) and social-cultural proponent such as Heath (1983) have contested this position. Over the last three decades or so, one strand of cognitive research has favoured the interactive nature of reading, a position which views positively the relationship between the reading experience of a real reader and a text on one side, and the usefulness of the reader's prior knowledge in making sense of the texts on the other side (Davies, 1995).

Cognitive Theory, which underpins schema theory, asserts that there is a universal foundation that underlies knowledge and one which guarantees its truth and accuracy. I see this advocacy as an attempt to present reading in reductionist terms; that is, as a hierarchy of skills thereby reinforcing the notion that the primary function of language is communication. Cultural theorists do not accept this cognitivist position as they claim there are no universals. Thus what the cognitivists project as universals, are nothing more than temporarily situated points of agreement by those in a particular discourse community. In consequence, the full potential of Schema Theory cannot be realized without developing an understanding of how readers are constructed by larger social experiences and how they utilize these experiences in the construction of texts (McCormick, 1994). In light of this, we need to reject the Cognitive Model as it makes a deliberate attempt to disregard the students' cultural and social capital, i.e. their life experience, history and language. As such they will not be able to: foster critical reflection, respect their own practical experience, motivate their sense of involvement and celebrate their uniqueness as individuals.

The Expressivist Model, unlike the Cognitive Model, assigns a high order of priority to the reader's life experience in the reading process. Drawing on the Psycholinguistic Approach advocated by Smith (1983) and Reader-Response Approaches to the reading of literature defined by Rosenblatt (1995), Fish (1980) and Bleich (1978, 1985), this model lays the groundwork for a student-centered pedagogy of voice and experience. The following quotation from Rosenblatt (1995, p. 24) serves to identify the key elements of this model. According to her "there is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are in reality only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works."

Viewed from this perspective of self-empowerment, reading is an activity in which readers create their own personal or subjective meanings from the texts they read. Signposting the uniqueness of the cultural context in which reading takes place, the expressivists appreciate the richness and uniqueness of students' backgrounds and encourage them to develop their own individual and authentic response to texts. The individualistic credo articulated by this model could be traced back to the student-centered views of education advanced by Rousseau and Dewey. Thus the scope for innovative pedagogies and active learning is a natural corollary to this model. Psycholinguists/reading specialists such as Smith (1983) and Goodman (in Carrell, Devine and Eskey, 1988, pp. 11-21), along with reader-response pedagogy specialists such as Rosenblatt (1978, 1995), Bleich (1978), and Fish (1980), have used this model to propose that language teachers use literature in the classroom, that students read stories from cover to cover without intrusion, that students discuss their reading of stories with each other and that they work collaboratively on reading projects.

The new literacy perspective (Willinsky, 1990), which assumes special substance in Frank Smith's work in early reading acquisition, views reading as a social practice. It advocates that teachers be free to choose their books and that students be allowed to read them without the continual bombardment of comprehension questions. By emphasizing the affective dimensions, this model succeeds in presenting reading as a joyful experience of self-discovery and social empowerment. Such a position articulates the urgent necessity to factor in social and anthropological approaches to reading, which espouse subjectivity and intersubjectivity as the focal points for assessing reading outcomes (Hudson, 2007).

In light of this perspective, the issues and insights to be explored in this engagement are a reiteration of the quintessential aspects of an ethnographic classroom study conducted at Assumption University, Bangkok (Sivasubramaniam, 2004). These issues and insights assume particular substance and prominence in this paper, as they constitute the pedagogical adjustments that I made to the reading course I coordinated in the College of Arts, University of Bahrain.

In order to nourish and promote response, open-ended texts dealing with themes of daily living were chosen. These ranged from episodic accounts of personal experiences to descriptions and narratives that targeted ideas/beliefs that constitute the common core of humanity. In this respect they were literature texts with a small 'l' (McRae, 1991). These texts by virtue of being able to relate to life provided the students (200 in all) an engaging basis to involve with the texts and personalize them. Some of the texts were used for shared reading and some of them for individual-cum-shared reading. As these students were being groomed to become schoolteachers in Bahrain, it

was contingent on the course and its deliverers (we the teachers) to provide reading experiences that would center on their response potential. I used reading response questionnaire and response journals to foster a capacity for response in the students.

The reading response questionnaire was intended to provide and promote a basis for transactions between individual readers and literary texts (Rosenblatt, 1995). In its own right, it was to become an *opinionnaire* (Rosenblatt, 1995) by asking students to express their opinions and feelings about what they read both in and out of class. I thought, in the long run this activity might become a powerful instrument for students to interpret complex elements of the texts that they would be asked to read. Thus this activity laid the groundwork for developing their response potential along with an awareness of their reading styles and strengths. The questionnaire had the following six questions and the students filled them out on a weekly basis:

1. What did you read? (Show your ideas in words or phrases only)
2. What problems did you have while reading?
3. What interested you in the reading?
4. What new vocabulary did you learn?
5. How would you connect your reading to your life?
6. Extra comments.

I used the reading response questionnaire to provoke response from students and to lay the groundwork for building a positive attitude to reading. I hypothesized that my students might use it as an instrument for nurturing awareness of reading thereby developing a keen aptitude for reading. The six questions I used in the questionnaire were meant to develop cognitive, affective or evaluative and actional dimensions in my students' reading. Therefore, I had to use this instrument with care and sensitivity. I did not impose the questionnaire on my students. On the contrary, I suggested that it might be good practice for them to fill it in on a regular basis so as to improve their thinking and understanding of what they read in the texts. However my students found it a motivating experience to fill in the questionnaires on a weekly basis and by the end of the sixty hour course, each student had filled in more than a hundred reading response questionnaires.

When I sifted through the questionnaires at the end of the reading programme, I noticed a number of similarities and uniformities in them. These appeared to form conceptual patterns and categories. A closer scrutiny revealed remarkable patterns of congruencies and connections in the responses expressed by the students during the programme. Interestingly enough, these patterns of congruencies and connections had a backwash effect on my perceptions of students' performance during the different stages of the programme. In retrospect, the varying images of students' participation and response as evidenced by the questionnaires, matched with the intuitions, beliefs and value systems that underlay my understanding of their performance. Therefore, I decided to explore them through metaphorical categorizations. Given that metaphors 'create very colourful and persisting images, for example, of teacher's roles, hard working students, slow learners, the school as an institution, discipline and so on' (Jaatinen in Kohonen et al, 2001, p.134), I believed that these categorizations should provide the conceptual framework for analyzing students' reading responses. The



following assertions (ibid: p.134) justify that: 'the teachers should be encouraged and helped to identify and analyze their metaphors concerning school life, learners and teacher's profession'.

Such metaphorical categorizations relate to my understanding of three types of students whose characteristics evolved as they progressed through the programme. The first type of students (i.e. the top 20% of the class) demonstrated the desire and the ability to be very successful in their studies. Their sense of involvement, fund of initiatives, perceptive and interpretive abilities made them the top-ranking students of the class. The second type of students (i.e. the middle 60% of the class) was not so brilliant as the first type, at least, in a qualitative sense. But they were well oriented to the learning experiences, hard working, reasonably intelligent/perceptive and were ever willing to try and succeed. One unique feature that could be recalled about them was that they were not shy about approaching 'the first type of students' in their respective groups for stimulus and synergy. Furthermore, they were my constant advisees in that they met me freely and frequently outside of their class hours. The third type of students (i.e. the bottom 20% of the class) for various undetermined reasons, made minimal progress. In a qualitative sense, they did not push themselves hard enough like the 'second type of students'. Their sense of engagement with the texts, classroom procedures and generally with their peers and teacher(s) was low. However, this does not presuppose that these students were demotivated or disoriented. Almost all of them stayed on and managed to pass the course.

Based on this understanding, I metaphorically categorized the first type of students as 'The Highfliers', the second type as 'The Seekers' and the third type as 'The Survivors'. By the same token, it was decided to analyze the data belonging only to three students in each category in order to provide a representative sampling of what happened in the programme. Given the enormous quantity of responses collected, it is not possible to present all of them in their complete form. I hasten to point out, at this juncture, that this metaphorical categorization was done discretely for the purpose of analysis and interpretation only. At no point of time during the programme, were the students given any impression whatsoever, that they were being metaphorically categorized. So, it should be noted that they did not function in such metaphorically classified ability groups in the real world of their language classroom. Most importantly, the students in my classes following this programme were made to change their groups on a fortnightly basis so that they would get to know one another personally as well as possible. This was necessary because the study was envisaged to be an 'open dialogue' (Kohonen et al, 2001) in which the students did not fear the 'other.' Having said this, I wish to reemphasize that the responses to be presented here should be understood with reference to the three metaphorical categories described earlier. In this connection, they should be viewed as a cumulative educational process over a period of time. Furthermore, focusing on the individual student as the principal unit of analysis in this inquiry will only produce an incomplete and an unrepresentative classroom story (Willett, 1995). So the metaphorical grouping is necessary for the purpose of data analysis and interpretation of the findings in this research. Therefore, 'to assign it an exact and isolated role would be like asking the exact role of each blade of grass in a field' (Brumfit, 2001, p.11). Based on the beliefs and the values expressed I had expressed so far, I propose to: present the data from the reading response questionnaire as a summary of salient



features and points with reference to each metaphorical categorization of students. (As more than 2000 reading response questionnaires needed to be sampled, it is impossible to present them in their complete form either here or in the appendix.)

### Illustrating Some Student Responses

The following are students' responses to an excerpt from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* presented in the anthology *Chapter And Verse* by John McRae and Luisa Pantaleoni (1990). The text in focus uses a striking contrast in that it equates Lord Henry with experience and Dorian Gray with inexperience that is characterized by his restless approach to things. The list of should-do's and should not-do's provides an interesting reference point for analyzing the text in terms of time content. The expressions of happiness used in the text proved to be particularly engaging to my students. I read and discussed certain parts of the text in class and asked my students to reengage themselves with it outside the class.

- What did you read?

The Highfliers: They identified Lord Henry's reminder to Dorian Gray. They referred to Lord Henry's advice, his experience and Dorian's inexperience.

The Seekers: They talked about Dorian's picture. They were curious about Lord Henry's visit to Dorian and found the friendship between them particularly interesting.

The Survivors: They referred to Dorian's talk with Lord Henry and focused on Dorian's sadness and Lord Henry's happiness.

- What problems did you have while reading?

The Highfliers: They found the aesthetic message of the text difficult to understand. They referred to the time adverbials and the difficulties it posed.

The Seekers: They found the connections between beauty and genius difficult to understand. They wanted to know how thought could "sear your forehead".

The Survivors: They said they had problems grasping the assertive statements in the text.

- What interested you in the reading?

The Highfliers: They were interested in Lord Henry's advice. They found references to youth particularly interesting.

The Seekers: They were intrigued by expressions such as 'Don't squander the gold of your days listening to the tedious... the vulgar...' They were equally interested in the expressions that sounded exaggerated,

The Survivors: They were interested in the literal meaning of the word 'sunburnt'. They expressed a keen desire to find out all about tanning.

- What new vocabulary did you learn?

The Highfliers: They were moved by adjectives in the text such as 'marvellous, ugly, hideous, jealous and bitter'

The Seekers: They were drawn to the verbs that figured in

Lord Henry's advice to Dorian.

The Survivors: They indicated a choice of words that reflected their fondness for simple words.

- How would you connect your reading to your life?

The Highfliers: They felt that they should make use of the present time, the existing opportunities and follow Lord Henry's advice to the last letter.

The Seekers: They related the text to their growing need for information and ideas. They realized that reading mattered more in life than anything else, as they were able to see how Lord Henry could use his wisdom gained through reading.

The Survivors: They mostly wanted to find out how to use the textual information for their quizzes and exams.

*(See appendix 1 for additional samplings of student responses)*

Due to the response-eliciting nature of the questionnaires the students completed, the testing in this course departed from a traditional, transfer of information comprehension model in that the questions asked were predominantly based on attempts to relate reading to personal experience. They were mostly open-ended questions that required the students to answer the how and why of what they read in the text. Furthermore, they were asked to write first person accounts of their reading experiences. The results obtained were not only supportive of the issues and insights that are being discussed in this article but were also helpful in formulating reading assessment practices that were response centered. Therefore, the express purpose of this article is to arm teachers of reading with an understanding of 'response' and to augment that understanding through a set of guidelines for suggestive practice and assessment.

How does a teacher of reading assess response?

Research findings in the field of reading suggest that readers' responses can be best assessed as indications/indicators of varying levels of engagement in reading (Barr, Kamil, Mosenthal and Pearson, 2000). In order to assess the quality and intensity of readers' engagement in reading we need to pose the following set of questions:

- Do the readers build up a mental picture by which they visit the scenes of a text as they would in real life?
- Do the readers anticipate and hypothesize about upcoming events or reflect on the text that they have been constructing?
- Do the readers become one with the text empathizing with characters and situations?
- Do the readers evaluate the text using their own set of value judgments on the events and persons in the text?

The questions posed above necessitate a response-centered approach to reading, one in which students not only personalize their reading of a text but also begin to value their subjectivity as an educational benefit. Such a realization can motivate them into becoming better readers and thinkers. The use of response journals in the reading classroom can capture their lived through experiences of reading and such an outcome can lay the groundwork for using personal response

questions in reading exams. Asking students to write first person narrations that relate to either their encounters with particular character(s) or their evaluation of people/place/time in a story/text can be particularly beneficial. Furthermore, response questions can be framed keeping in mind the emotional, social and moral values/judgements that accrue through students reading involvement.

The students' responses from their journals presented below can serve to illustrate their deeper sense of engagement with the texts that they read. Most importantly, they can provide some useful insights into the questions posed earlier. The students appear to have made a definitive attempt to draw on their experiences as their sense of involvement with the texts had been strengthened. In the views of Protherough (in Corcoran and Evans, 1987, p. 80) they learned:

...how to project themselves into a character whose feelings and adventures they share, how to enter a situation close to the characters, how to establish links between their own lives and the people and events of the story, how to become a more distanced watcher of what is described. And we suspect that these different kinds of reader behaviour are incremental: that children extend their repertoire and are therefore progressively able to enjoy a wider variety of texts which make different demands on them.

The following responses can serve to support/illustrate the afore-mentioned points:

Highflier 1: I read William Cowper's *The Poplar Field*. This poem is the story of a writer talking about transformation of nature and time. He described the different perceptions in different time at the same place..... The poet uses powerful words to show his feeling such as 'winds play no longer and sing in the leaves' 'The tree is my seat' I now understand the implied meanings largely.

Highflier 2 I read the story, *The Tunnel*. It is about a youth couple..... For my opinion I think their love was on the wrong way. They are not ready to marry. Hence it can create many problems... if they have a child can they take care of their child?

Highflier 3: I read *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller. It talks about the characters in order of importance, in the hierarchy of authority and kind of authority... I see the dilemma in the text, if you obey the order you will die. But if you don't obey the order you will still die. I think this is a sad situation. Authority uses power to kill.

Seeker 1: I read the poem, *The Poplar Field*. I feel sad for the poet. He is shocked by the disappearance of poplar trees.... He always dreamt to come to this favourite place again. He realizes that time has changed everything.

Seeker 2: I read theme unit, *Family*. The first text was about the father and son. The father wants the son to do like him but the son didn't believe him. The second text was about the father and his family.... I think these two texts are different.

Seeker 3: I read a sad story in *family*. The main problem was communication gap between the father and family. I thought the story was sad because the father always think about money.

Survivor 1: I read *The Poplar Field*. In my opinion, I think this poem about transformation... If we are helpless to save environment like the poplar one day we will feel like the man in this poem.

Survivor 2: I read the text *Sons and Lovers*. There is an angry father. Children fear him. I feel pity for Paul. He don't want to tell his father about his prize because he is so afraid.

Survivor 3: I read about *The Father and Son*. Dad wants his son to grow slowly so that he can learn a lot of things by himself... I think if dad and son listen to each other's problem, the problem will not happen.

*(See Appendix 2 for fuller versions of these responses)*

It is evident from these responses that an affective/subjective engagement with reading literature lays the groundwork for the experience of literature as a space for reflecting in an atmosphere free of all fear. So, it is unlikely that such an experience of reading could either be diminished or superseded by a demand for public interpretation. The following explanation by Nelson and Zancanella (in Hayhoe and Parker, 1990, p. 42) not only attests to what the analysis has pointed but also demonstrates the power of the living-through experienced by the students, which is synonymous with response. It should be stressed here that this is the accrued benefit of involving students with reading and personalizing it as an educational endeavour. Such a position should be seen as a vital feature of a rewarding pedagogy of voice and experience:

The 'lived-through' aesthetic experience is not short-circuited by the academic application of a formulaic approach to the derivation of meaning and value. For students to 'cast their own strand of thought and text into this network', those strands of thought and text must be derived from an authentic encounter with the text, not simply an encounter with the teacher's (or some other adult's text about (around, upon, against, outside) the text.

The responses point to an awareness in students, which encouraged them to think about aspects of human existence that they shared with their equals in other cultures. It gratifies me to note that the students made a definite attempt to relate the text to their own emotions and relationships. The element of self-referentiality evidenced in their curiosity and concern about the 'other' increased their urge to communicate it in speech and writing. It is apparent that they were beginning to feel that their own use of English was more than a mere academic task.

If we relate our students' responses to these questions, we can get a clearer idea of how strong or weak their engagement in reading has been. Accordingly, it is feasible to assess their responses on a ten-point scale:

- 8-10 points can be awarded to responses that indicate strong engagement

The responses of the Highfliers qualify for strong engagement as they signal a strong sense of personalization and involvement.

- 5-7 points can be awarded for responses that indicate moderate engagement.

The responses of the Seekers qualify for moderate engagement as they signal discernible attempt to engage with the text in order to personalize it.

- 3- 4 points can be awarded for responses that indicate weak engagement.

The responses of the survivors qualify for weak engagement as they signal a certain degree of avoidance to personalize the text as this category of students appear to be more concerned about the givens in the text rather than the means available for them in the text to personalize it.

Assessments reflecting the above guidelines (were used)/ can be used both for reading response questionnaires, response journals and questions featured in exams. However, the above-mentioned guidelines are not absolutes. A teacher of reading ought to use the scale discreetly and judiciously. It will be beneficial both pedagogically and socially if 60% of the assessment is predicated on students' reading response questionnaires, response journals and 40% on the final exam. \* Given the institutional politics and practices of homogenization and control it may not be easy for us to implement the assessment practice(s) discussed in this inquiry. However, it should be easy for all of us as reading teachers to form *focus groups of reading assessment* and negotiate our well-informed practices of reading assessment with our institutional superiors in order to facilitate student-centered assessment practices. (See Appendix 3 for some useful insights on this issue)

What happens after assessment?

In retrospect, we realize that assessment takes us back to classroom practices and touches upon the following issues that were noticed and assessed in our students' reading engagement (Bonilla, 1991). These issues are vital because they are believed to enhance and enrich the receptive dynamics of the response process and maximize the utilization of all the socio-affective means of meaning construction that accrue as a result of involved reading endeavors:

- What did they like/dislike in their reading/why
- How did they like the illustrations in the text?
- What did the text remind them of/how did the text relate to their life

When students personalize the texts they read, they are naturally encouraged to activate their hypothetical/ critical thinking about the issues they have encountered. Very often they wish a person or a place had been different from the way they have been placed in the text. They also feel that they have the power of their sensitivity/ understanding to change/alter the realities presented by the text, while at the same time appreciating the parallels between their lives and what they come across in the texts they read.

This is to suggest that the learners' emotional investment-affect, in learning is an integral part of reading. Therefore, understanding the emotional make-up of the learners and its influence on reading can have a contributory effect on the students' self-esteem. As observed by Stern (1983, p.386)

'the affective component contributes at least as much and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills.' Moreover, I believe that the various concepts and meanings a learner encounters can become part of his/her personal constructs only if they are experienced on a subjective and emotional level. In the light of this, we need to understand that 'emotions are not extras. They are the very center of human mental life... (They) link what is important for us to the world of people, things, and happenings' (Oatley and Jenkins, 1996: 122). Thus, emotions are at the very root of our motivation to do or not to do something.

- What do they wish had happened?
- What do they wish the author had included?

When taken together, these two questions can have particular relevance to the students' immediate reading environment. When students personalize the texts they read, they are naturally encouraged to activate their hypothetical/critical thought about the issues they have encountered. Very often they wish a person or a place had been different from the way they have been placed in the text. They also feel that they have the power of their sensitivity/ understanding to change/alter the realities presented by the text.

- What do they think about the characters?

A question such as this one can encourage the students to reconstruct the identity of a character in the text and in doing so empower the students into reconstructing themselves. In addition, their reconstructions can help them either empathize or antipathize with a particular character.

- How good/bad are they are with their predictions
- How did the words in the text influence their feelings of acceptance or appreciation

Questions such as these evidence how and why the students use their values, beliefs and intuitions the way they do and how by doing so they nurture their agency, voice and subjecthood. Such realizations encourage the students to believe that they are 'a creative supplement rather than a recipient' (Mackenzie, 2002: 46) thereby giving them the remit to challenge the author's authority and to attempt understanding independently of the imposed textual conventions.

Conclusion: Signposting a Prospect and a Resolve

The ideas and insights stated so far, envisage an active role for the students to react to and reflect on their reading. Such a role can help both the learner and the teacher to take an associative/ facilitative/negotiative view of reading assessment. 'Consequently, we should think of language as an experience rather than as a repository of extractable meanings' (Fish, 1980, p. 67). In this regard, the students find it an educating experience to voice and share their perceptions of what has been read. The active utilization of reading response questionnaires, response journals and reading portfolios by students fosters in them a belief that they are as empowered as their teachers to propose meanings/ideas and translate them into perspectival/speculative knowledge by

which they live by (Sivasubramaniam, 2004). As a result, reading assessment becomes a student-centered undertaking. This is not to suggest that the teacher will assess the students as they wish to be assessed. But it is to suggest that the participatory role of the students can make them take responsibility for reading and for taking control of how the tasks and strategies proposed by the teacher should be handled (Clark, 1987; Nunan, 1988). The accruing autonomy and involvement of the students can support constructivist practices in reading and its assessment in addition to offering benefits to and motivating the students.

Very often teachers carry out policy decisions about subject matter and classroom management made by their institutions. In doing so, they become 'curriculum clerks' (Delawter in Langer, 1992, p. 101). In light of this, response-centered reading pedagogies can help them voice their professional beliefs and concerns in order to construct new perspectives on their role as reading teachers. It is argued that metaphors in current educational use liken educational practices to those followed in the fields of business, computer industry and the military. Such a likening projects educational practices as prescribed systems to be followed with utmost care. As a result the teachers' role gets banalized (Smith, 1988).

It is further argued that there is urgent need to discard the teacher-as-curriculum clerk metaphor and put in its place teacher-as-explorer metaphor. The prevalence of such a metaphor can reinforce a progressivist concern for teacher empowerment through reflective teaching practice. By voicing their beliefs and concerns, teachers can experience a new sense of freedom. This sense of freedom can alert them to new alternatives to perspectives on their teaching practices. Thus they can become explorers of knowledge and facilitators of constructive social change (Smith, 1988).

Currently, assessment and measurement procedures in higher education appear to center on calculable and quantifiable outcomes of reading/learning. This is to suggest that the institutional politics is noticeably biased in favour of only those outcomes of reading/ learning, which are easily quantifiable and computable. In light of this, correct comprehension, accurate answers, and information transfer are accorded a high degree of acceptance and priority much to the detriment of reading as an educational practice. These are symptoms of a fast spreading educational malaise, which needs urgent eradication. It is my belief that such an endeavour is possible only through encouraging our students to view reading as a process of educational response and empowerment.

If reading education is to bring about constructive social change, empowerment and democratic citizenry, it should provide substantial opportunity for our students to engage with it emotionally, aesthetically and applicatively (Mackenzie, 2002). Only then will our students realize the beneficial impact of their interpretive and imaginative abilities in the use of their language and only then, will our students realize the immediacy and primacy of their meaning creations through their use of language. Such endeavours and outcomes are not only vital to our students' language development but are also crucial to their emotional and intellectual development without which they will be defenseless in a world characterized by a culture of categorical stupidity and illiteracy (Freire and Macedo, 1987).

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***See PDF for appendix***



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