Using Reader Responses and Discovery Responses with Tertiary Students in Three Countries
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Abstract: This article describes a teaching and learning activity in which reader responses and discovery responses were used by students in three countries as they read a canonical work of American literature, Hemingway's *A Day's Wait*. Through careful section of the text, the activity successfully negotiated challenges faced by students whose primary language is not English. In premising the activity in reader response theory, the problematic of teaching a set of values deemed to be American was evaded, yet the activity still aroused students' interest in American literature as well as how peers in other countries engaged with the text.

Keywords: American literature, reader response, discovery response, ESL

In teaching American literature in English to tertiary students in other countries there are two factors in particular which require special attention. The first one is the role of language. Following Kachru (356), the students studying American literature are likely to be in English's second circle (such as Nigeria) or third circle (such as Japan) rather than a first circle country like the United States or Britain. Students would therefore be likely to be studying in English as a Second Language (ESL) and their instructors would also likely be teaching in ESL. The amount of English vocabulary which second or third circle students have acquired in most instances falls short of the range which their counterparts in American colleges and universities have. Consequently, their facility with English - the language of most American literature - is usually less than their American peers.

The second factor that needs to be considered is the role of cultural knowledge and values. The mission of some of the earliest teachers of American literature outside the U.S., the Thomasites, was in part to convey such cultural knowledge and the values which American culture is considered to have (Karnow 179; Fee 103-104; Wesling 88). Their heir, the Peace Corps, today maintains on-

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1 An earlier version, *Internationalizing a Corner of the Student Experience: A Case Study*, was presented as a slide presentation at the Fifth QS Middle East and North Africa Professional Leaders in Education Conference and Exhibition in Doha, Qatar in May, 2015.
line resources for its volunteer teachers for teaching literature (111, 112, 171). The American ambivalence with empire (Davis 298; 307-8), however, meant that teaching American literature overseas was, on the whole, less focused in purpose at that time than that of the British imperial project, which used English literature as a medium for colonized persons to assimilate British culture (Howatt 212). Students’ familiarity with American culture today is probably influenced chiefly through American media, as mass media for most persons is the primary channel for representing and expressing a culture (McQuail 4). However, the degree of penetration of American culture by mass media into the cultures of other countries is likely to vary. The effect of this second factor of uncertain knowledge of American culture is that the obvious as well as the nuanced in much American literature is less likely to be perceived by overseas university students compared to their American peers.

However, cultural appreciation and teaching American values does not have to be an aim of studying American literature; on the contrary, the teaching of American culture and values through its literature may be received in some institutions as a subtle form of imperialism, as in the British experience, even if outwardly benign or benevolent.

Selection of texts and the types of activities used with them can help to address the two factors described above. First, texts with simpler vocabulary and writing styles should facilitate ESL students’ comprehension and they would therefore be more likely to come away with a sense of accomplishment, appreciation, and desire for further American literature study. This is true even with tertiary students, who may feel frustrated and turned off to American literature if the text is out of their depth linguistically. Secondly, the type of activity for engaging students with texts is also important and here we do well to recall that individual students respond to literature in both similar and different ways in relation to their peers. For example, in a single literature class students may have general agreement on the conflict and the setting but may have different ideas on the development of characters or the overall theme. These similarities and differences can be attributed to what Fish (3) calls an interpretive community or explained by Rosenblatt (77) as accumulated life experiences. Differences and similarities also can be accounted for by what Smith (12) says is reading with what is behind the eyes, or using the organ of our brain with its repository of knowledge and experience to make sense of a text. Iser (64; 107) says our brains’ cognitive processes in responding to a work are as important as the work itself and he emphasizes the construction of meaning by text and reader both. Some differences relative to American students can be expected when students in different countries respond to the same literature text. The reasons for these differences – one may say similarities as well - can be explained with reader response theory which
incorporate the ideas of Rosenblatt, Iser, Fish, and others; their ideas can be understood more clearly still when contrasted with the New Critics. While I.A. Richards, for example, was interested in his Oxford students’ responses to literature in the 1920s, he was ultimately an advocate of New Criticism, which emphasized the text only as the repository of meaning (240). Reader response theory arose with Rosenblatt a decade later and was a reaction to the essentialism of New Critics like Richards, although her work was not substantially embraced until almost half a century later. Whereas the New Critics regarded the text as an ontologically separate object requiring an essentialist epistemology which would lead to understanding the correct meaning, reader response advocates emphasize the constructivist nature of the text wherein readers fill in gaps in their understanding with what they already know.

Activities which exploit reader response theory with students adds an interesting dimension to the study of American literature in second and third circle country classrooms and helps to address some of the challenging factors in students’ engagement with it. Relying on these features of reader response theory, Hirvela, and Corrigan and Chiad, have discussed the use of reader responses to literature written in English but read and studied in ESL settings. While Hirvela (129) reifies a distinction between so-called personal responses and reader response, Corrigan and Chiad (53) do not. Corrigan and Chiad also avoid a stance on the explicit teaching of the ‘native’ culture and its values through literature, instead encouraging students to interact with the literature on their own terms. They take the additional step of having students exchange reader responses. In their activity, their university students in Iraq and Hong Kong, and a group of university students in the United States, exchanged reader responses to Hemingway’s *Cat in the Rain*. A student in the United States would read a reader response written by a student in Iraq who would read a reader response written by a student in Hong Kong who would read one by an American student. Within a classroom of students, responses from both of the other countries were read and discussed.

II

In the current study, we repeat the method Corrigan and Chiad used but we add an additional step in the form of writing what we call ‘discovery responses’. In essence, discovery responses involve reading the reader response of a student from another country and discovering what is similar or different relative to one’s own response and then writing about it. Keeping in mind the ESL proficiency of our students, we selected the Hemingway short story *A Day’s Wait* for our students to read. “Simple true sentences” (Hemingway, in Broer 133) is integral to Hemingway’s art and *A Day’s*
Wait is a testament to that aesthetic. The significance of simple true sentences for American literature students in second and third circle countries is that Hemingway’s language is easier to understand than many other American authors, yet without being simplistic and without diminishing literary value.

Our tertiary students in the current study were all in the same age range, i.e., 18 – 22, and came from relatively new institutions: the Federal Polytechnic, Bida in Nigeria; City University of Hong Kong in China; and the University of Kerbala in Iraq. The Federal Polytechnic in Bida was founded in 1977 and has about 12,000 students. City University of Hong Kong was founded in 1984 as a polytechnic, moving to university status 10 years later, and currently enrolling about 20,000 students. The University of Kerbala was founded in 2002 and has about 12,000 students. All three jurisdictions in which the institutions are found were ruled for a period by Britain, with Hong Kong under British rule for the longest period of time and Iraq the shortest, and consequently possessing proportional degrees of an English linguistic legacy.

After establishing contact with each other, we discussed what to do. First, we sought agreement on some basic assumptions before embarking on this project and we then articulated them as follows:

1. The words of a literature text remain the same no matter who reads them.
2. Following reader response theory, the responses of a reader to a text may vary depending on the individual as well as the interpretive community to which s/he belongs.
3. A) Reading a text, B) writing responses, and C) sharing those responses with students in different countries, then D) writing on what was discovered as similar/different in those responses compared with one’s own response, could offer international perspectives to students.

Having agreed on and articulated those assumptions, we made the following plan to carry out the project:

1. Our students in Nigeria, Iraq, and Hong Kong would read the same Hemingway story, A Day’s Wait.
2. The students would be asked to write a well-organized, personal reader response of a few hundred words to the story.
3. Teachers would collect the reader responses and request informed consent to use them for exchange and research; the responses from students giving informed consent would be exchanged among teachers in all three countries by email.

4. Through the teacher, a student would be given a reader response from a student in one of the other countries.

5. The student would read the reader response and reflect on what is similar to and different from his/her own reader response.

6. The student would be asked to write a discovery response on the similarities and differences.

7. The students would then be told from what country the other students are and the class would discuss questions the students raised.

8. The teachers read the reader responses and discovery responses to see what emerged from the data.

The project took several months to carry out. Academic semesters varied from country to country so students did not all read the short story nor write the reader responses and discovery responses at the same time. Teachers in Hong Kong, Iraq, and Nigeria had to find suitable times to assign the reading and writing for their own students as well as allow time for discussion in class. While email among the three teachers permitted the exchange of the students’ work, it was sometimes not equally accessible nor reliable across all three countries. These factors, in addition to the reality that not all students gave informed consent, meant that close attention to simple clerical tasks was needed and the project was stretched out. In the end, we were able to obtain informed consent from a significant number of students and collected their responses, as shown in Table 1.

| Table 1 |
| Responses Collected |

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The students’ reader responses and discovery responses were illuminating for both students and teachers. We have provided samples of the students’ reader responses in Table 2 and their discovery responses in Table 3, below.

### Table 2
**Sample Reader Response Excerpts: *A Day’s Wait***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Reader Responses</th>
<th>Discovery Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The theme for me was love, mainly between the father and the son. It can also be about the consequences of being afraid to speak up.

A day’s wait is a brief story by Ernest Hemingway that conveys the seemingly tragic outcome of miscommunication between a boy and his father.

This story explodes me to the sad truth about family that both parents and children are living in their own worlds and block further contacts with each other. They are taking each other as granted for their lives. Miscommunication and misunderstanding still exist in today’s families. Another thing I have interpreted [Hemingway] wants to talk about the death, the illness, courage and cowardness. We know the best thing in the life is health and the worse thing is death, but we must show some bravery in these situations. If it is good or not, even death is due to our God who says in Quran that death will arrive to any human beings and any creatures but God.

This is a good story that illustrate the suffering that result from miss understanding that occur every day in medicine. Patients and health care professionals represent different culture and they speak different languages. Now a days, laypersons often believe that they can interpreted “medicalese” which takes the pressure of
from this story is that we should face every difficulties in our lives with passion and bravery just like the son. Otherwise, we will live unhappily for the rest of our lives and die.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I think the story depicts mostly about the braveness of that little boy – how he faces his anticipated death. I repeatedly read over the text, but I am still not able to understand why Hemingway puts the hunting part in the story, (which the hunting part comprises a very large proportion to the entire story).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The boy’s action is not courageous because when his father explains everything the boy relaxed, in this way the story ends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And in my own point of view I see patriotic hero. He was a hero that thinks death should be done by him alone instead of spreading the influenza to others only a hero does that keeping selfish interest aside but thinking on the welfare of others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| a physician, who finds it difficult to remember how to use different language. This can lead to situation like that of Schartz. Patients and physician look at the same situation, but draw very implication from it. |

Table 3
Sample Discovery Responses
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hong Kong</th>
<th>Iraq</th>
<th>Nigeria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The other student viewed the story in a serious manner while I found the story a relaxing read. There may be misunderstanding between the characters but I could feel the love of the father and son.</td>
<td>I think this essay is better than my essay where the student explained life in general, how we should be optimistic and try to find out the truth and not to assume things did not happen but my essay focused on the relationship between father and son and how misunderstanding happened between them.</td>
<td>The major area of similarity between my view and the view of the other writer is the fact that there was lack of communication between the father and his son. Young children should be open to their parents and parents should be standing and making the children feel free to share their problem. There should be room for interaction. Otherwise the children will be scared of their parents. Our points of view are quite different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I read the story and thought more about the boy. And the other student read the story through the father’s eyes and thought.</td>
<td>The writer of the other country stressed the same theme that the boy took little things serious because he doesn’t know if he will die or not. So the writer starts to discuss the child’s feeling, when he thinks that he will be die sooner or later. But I guess that the writer magnifies it even more than it should.</td>
<td>I agree with the other writer that children need the help of adults to overcome all their worries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The diverse interpretations between the student and me can be attributed to different</td>
<td>The student gave his opinion in all the essay and that was clear from word “I” but my</td>
<td>My understanding of the story is almost the same with that of the other reader. The</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mindsets shaped by the exposure to philosophical thinking. I have experienced how to appreciate Classical Chinese poetry and I have learnt that people are thinking differently due to different backgrounds and perceptions, so I come into conclusion of this story.

essay was explaining the picture. story is all about miscommunication.

III

To conclude, we found that the students in all three countries generally enjoyed the project, though not all students wished to take part in allowing others to read their work. Nevertheless, those who did not give consent for their own work to be read by others still benefitted from reading and discussing work from students who had given their consent. As became evident in class discussion, the curiosity of some students was piqued about the country of the students whose reader responses they read as well as America itself. Students were often surprised by what the other students wrote, how they wrote it, and what their home countries were. The activity noticeably helped students to have a deeper and broader understanding of the American short story which they all read. Rather than reducing interpretation to a single, correct one as New Criticism implies, students from different countries could create multiple interpretations consistent with reader response theory. Rather than use the activity to teach American values either top down or covertly and at the risk of disaffecting some students, the activity provided leeway for students to explore, compare, and contrast values in the text with their own and to write about similarities or differences that they recognized.

In looking at their reader responses, we found that students by and large wrote on similar themes. Chief among these themes were communication, miscommunication, misunderstandings, and parent-child relationships. However, they often viewed such themes differently than their peers in other countries. For example, as seen in the reader response samples above, one student tended to see the boy afraid to speak up when his father was in the room while another saw a failure of the boy to listen to the father.
When writing their discovery responses about the reader responses of other students, students saw different foci in other students’ responses, especially in relation to summarizing versus interpreting and critical thinking versus lack of critical thinking. They also identified different perceptions of the same events in the same story. For example, as seen above, one student might think that the other student placed too much emphasis on the boy in his interpretation while another reported that the other student mainly saw the story through the father’s eyes. Due to the fact that they could see how their peers performed in ESL and critical thinking, some expressed that they were motivated to improve their own use of English, produce more critical interpretations of fiction in the future, and increase their knowledge about the countries of their peers. With these positive outcomes in mind, we hope to be able to do a similar project in the future and enlarge the circle of countries of participating students.
Works Cited


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