

***“I am no Othello. I am a lie”:
A Consideration of Reader-Response Theory as Language Learning
Pedagogy and Teacher Philosophy***

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Abstract

This paper seeks to articulate the understanding of transactional/reader-response as theory and its use in the language classroom as both teaching philosophy and pedagogy. First, I map the terrain of reader-response theory, its history, in general, and how it has been articulated in literary studies, in particular. Next, I briefly synthesise studies that sought to empirically study reader response in the classroom and question why these inevitably fail to engage meaningfully with it - and seem to instead only result in teacher “lesson plan” ideas. I offer a case study of a language student’s responses to the novel *Season of Migration to the North* (Salih, 2009) to argue that reader-response should be central to teaching philosophies that hope to centre learners in inclusive educational processes.

What we believe a book to be reshapes itself with every reading. Over the years, my experience, my tastes, my prejudices have changed: as the days go by, my memory keeps reshelving, cataloguing, discarding the volumes in my library; my words and my world—except for a few constant landmarks—are never one and the same. Heraclitus’s bon mot about time applies equally well to my reading: ‘You never dip into the same book twice.’-

Into the Looking-Glass Wood (Manguel, 2000, p.x)

Introduction

In her introduction to the 2009 translated edition of Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* (originally published in Arabic in 1967), Laila Lalami contends that the novel is about colonialism and how “it spreads from one people to the next and from one continent to the next, leaving behind it a steady trail of violence and destruction” (xix). While reading *Season*, proclaimed since its initial publication as a pinnacle of literary genius even as it stands amongst a many number of pinnacles of literary genius published during the *Nahda* or Arab Renaissance (which began in the 1800s and influenced Salih’s writing), it is not immediately clear what Lalami is referring to. Or at least, it was not so to my language student, Dawood (name changed), who read the novel for an independent study unit I had assigned. His final paper made no mention of the colonialism present in the text; perhaps, this is because, as young readers may be wont to do, he skipped over the introduction. Unlike Lalami, influenced no doubt by her literary knowledge, personal experiences, and historical acumen, Dawood had only the recommendation by his father, who suggested it would be a good choice since he had read it as a young man himself and enjoyed it immensely. To encourage his son, the father thought he would reread it simultaneously. In his final paper, my student reflected on how his father’s co-participation

in the reading process had resulted in some interesting conversations about the novel at their dinner table. His father, reading it as a parent rather than as a young man, and in the original Arabic as opposed to the translated English both times, was surprised by what he had missed or failed to remember during his prior reading. He thought the novel was about an intellectual journey on his first reading; noticed the sexual innuendos and allusions to Shakespeare's *Othello* on his second, so much so that he lamented the fact that he had recommended it to his son in the first place, now deeming it just a bit too mature and somewhat inappropriate.

For its part, *Season* tells the story of unnamed narrator who, in the 1960s, returns to his village in Sudan after years of studying in Europe, hoping to help herald it into the modern, postcolonial age. He crosses paths with the mysterious Mustafa Sa'eed, who narrates his own years in London, and makes a terrible confession of how he lured British women into his bed and killed the one who saw herself as a modern-day Desdemona. My objective in discussing the novel to begin this paper is to point to the multiplicities in 'readings' of one text between just three readers, coupled with the difference in life circumstance for one of them reading it for the second time and how this indicates the layers and polyphonies of meaning-making that invariably occur with any novel.

For me, this story demonstrates the importance of paying attention to the ways novel-reading and meaning-making inform our interactions both inside and outside of the classroom. Had I, as Dawood's teacher, for instance, agreed with Lalami and insisted that the only way to read Salih's novel was from a political postcolonial lens, then how could the assignment have been termed an "independent" study? How would swaying him to see my interpretation of the novel or Lalami's as the *right* one encourage the development of Dawood's own critical thinking skills? What sort of reader agency might I be negating by dictating one particular reading?

Thinking more broadly about the language classroom and literary study therein, the imposing of particular readings is all too commonplace. From our own experiences, we have probably heard at least one teacher or two say something along the lines of: *this is what Shakespeare meant when he says...* or *by virtue of the fact that x is a symbol of y, this is what we should understand the poet to mean by x*. That sort of structuralist approach to teaching has been contested in other disciplines, and in literary studies itself; nonetheless, the language learning classroom does not seem to be a site wherein a discussion about reader agency and the meaning-making aptitudes of our learners is happening (Hall, 2005). With English language learners, in particular, there exists a tendency to depend on more established or popular readings of difficult texts rather than constructing their own critical responses to them.

Because I bemoan practices that might deny language learners access to their *own* readings and critical responses, the purpose of this article is to conceptually develop and demonstrate how a mode of inquiry becomes one of stance (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). In it, I employ a three-fold methodology. First, I map the terrain of reader-response theory, its history, in general, and how it has been articulated in literary studies, in particular. This goal of this theoretical literature review is to understand the foundations of reader-response theory and its usefulness as a conceptual lens in classroom praxis. Second, I seek to synthesize studies and research that looks at how literary reader-response has been used in the classroom, particularly in language learning classrooms. The goal of this pedagogical literature review is to seek out exemplars for my own practice. Lastly, I

consider the gaps between these two areas by deliberating on why reader-response theory as a literary discipline fails to engage phenomenologically (Van Manen, 2014) with practice in the language learning classroom. I do this by considering the data collected from Dawood's reflections on *Season of Migration to the North* and my own notes while reading the novel. I suggest that when more language teachers identify in the role of meaning-making facilitators as per the principles of reader-response theory and perhaps against the dictates of their more formal training, then it might go a long way in bridging the gaps between theory and practice.

Defining Reader-Response Theory by Mapping its Historical Terrain

How does one define reader response theory? In her introduction to the collection of essays gathered for *Reader-response criticism: From formalism to post-structuralism*, Tompkins (1981) writes that reader-response criticism is "not a conceptually unified critical position" but that it does go directly against the conceptualization of the "Affective Fallacy" (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1949) which holds that relativism results when the meaning of a poem emerges from the psychological effects it has on readers. Reader-response critics would contend, Tompkins states, that the poem cannot be understood apart from its effects, psychological or otherwise.

Although Austin's work on speech-act theory (1962; Searle, 1969) more fittingly belongs to discourses of pragmatics, in trying to define reader-response criticism, it is useful to reflect on his contention that language is both a means of representation and a means of acting in the world. Language shapes people's perceptions of the world and their social realities. Austin's claims give credence to the idea that literature hinges on its being read in a certain way, to have effects on an audience—an audience that is implied in the text itself. Although response and interpretation may be somewhat predictable through the rhetoric of a text, it is its audience who shape how a literary work will ultimately be perceived and understood. The work of reader-response theorists, very generally defined, seeks then to argue that there is a necessary correlation between the work of an audience and the work in and of itself. In literary terms, theories of reader-response argue against the idea that meaning in works is singular and that authority over that singular meaning is situated with a work's author; rather, reader-response theories hold that meaning is constructed through a text's characteristics and the characteristics of a text's readers.

The task of historicizing reader-response might very well take us as far back as a study of the development of language; but asking how, for instance, people made meaning out of what ancient scribes had inscribed in cuneiform on clay tablets in Sumatra 4000 years BCE seems too great a task. Instead, to draw a perimeter of the field, it may be useful to think about reader-response as a theory of study only maturing in scholarship in the latter half of the 20th century and really burgeoning in North America with the work of Stanley Fish, most notably with the publication of *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980). In it, he argues that a reader's experiences and what he or she brings to a text should be prioritized over the formal features of a work, stating that the formal features are only described insofar as a human mind defines and extracts them. Formal features of a poem or a novel or narrative have no independent continuation outside of the text unless the reader chooses to respond to them. In an earlier work, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967), Fish's chapter, "Not so much a Teaching as an Entangling," begins with an epigram from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Aristotle's *The Poetics*

established the ancient Greek philosopher's theory of tragedy, still very valid in narrative structures across the 'arts board.' Central to Aristotelian thought is the notion of 'catharsis,' wherein he argues that tragedy succeeds because of the effects of emotional transformation it has on its audience (Butcher, Aristotle, Gassner, 1951). If audiences feel pity and fear, then a deeper meaning is understood in the purification properties of said affective experiences from and very real human reactions to a work. Because we can identify with a hero, we can identify with his/her plight. Emotional turns in a narrative intersect with emotional turns in an audience to create a moment of recognition that is most important to the reception of a work.

Beyond 322 BCE and the European Enlightenment that focused on Cartesian notions of reason and scientific inquiry, even the great literary movement of Romanticism which began in the late 1700s moved away from discourses on reader-response. Romantics emphasized the genius of the writer in creating a work of art that embodied the ideal and the real. If a work of literature had any effect on an audience worthy of mention, it was probably the way in which it inspired awe in its sublimity (Rivkin & Ryan, 1998). Not until Immanuel Kant's meditation on the "Transcendental Aesthetic" in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (published in 1781) was the mind's powers of deduction in shaping knowledge of the world discussed. Kantian thought holds that human minds come to art or literary works prepared to follow the trajectory of a narrative or poem and to make meaning from it. Certainly, each reader's understanding is differentiated through their individual experiences and sociocultural perspectives; nonetheless, there are some universals common to human understanding. The discussion continues in the realm of philosophy and in the 1960s and 1970s, it is influenced by post-structuralism thought and Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction.

Significantly, Barthes's 1967 "Death of the Author" (Barthes & Heath, ed., 1977) essay would become a sort of a manifesto for post-Structuralism and paved the way for the birth of the 'writerly' reader, or the reader who, in his/her capacity for responding to a text and 'writing in' meaning, shapes what that text is doing and tells a story that is beyond the imagination or pen of its initial author. He takes up hermeneutics as articulated in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1960). Gadamer argued that knowledge in a literary text must be garnered through a process of interpretation or a transfer of meaning from one moment of history into another that always inflects what is known with the categories and assumptions of the later moment. In exploring the role of language and the phenomenology of human interaction through language, Gadamer implies that readers, even if they do not realize it, bring their historically effected consciousness to all of their interpretive acts of language. Iser follows this line of thinking with *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978). It is a follow-up his *The Implied Reader* (Iser, 1974) and both works develop the idea that meaning in a literary text is to be found in the act of reading rather than in just the text itself. Iser argues that texts contain gaps (or blanks) that powerfully affect the reader, who must explain them, connect what they separate, and create in his or her mind aspects of a work that are not contained in a text but are incited by the text. In this way, Iser sought to align the ideals of hermeneutics and reader-response theory.

To move from the purely (and arbitrary) literary world and to putting reader-response into practice, the work of Louise Rosenblatt serves as the perfect segue. With her *Literature as Exploration* (1938), Rosenblatt truly mapped the field of reader-response and is often credited with the way in which reader-response as a theory can look like in practice.

In *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978), Rosenblatt contends that each transaction between a text and a reader is an individual and unique experience as each acts on the other. Meaning-making, then, is an individual process. Rosenblatt positioned her argument against the 1960s and 1970s movement known as New Criticism which held that a literary work should be considered as an entity in and of itself, an artifact or object that might be critiqued without consideration for its reception. Rosenblatt countered that “the idea that a poem presupposes a reader actively involved with a text is particularly shocking to those seeking to emphasize the objectivity of their interpretations” (1978).

Rosenblatt also looked at reading for different purposes, or what she refers to as “stances,” by placing reading experiences on a scale of the “aesthetic” or pleasure-reading to the “efferent” or looking for meaning reading. Rosenblatt held that the experience of evoking the poem (the word poem is appropriated by her to define the reader’s creation of meaning from any literary work) goes on as the reader moves towards understanding. She stated that it is an almost unconscious practice that has readers delicately sorting and revising and expanding their thoughts on what is relevant and irrelevant in a text (Rosenblatt, 1978). As a literacy pioneer, Rosenblatt not only centred the reader in the meaning-making process of the text; she also argued that comprehensive, advanced learning happened at the crucial event when readers met the texts they read with their *personal* particular interpretations. “No one else,” she claims, “no matter how much more competent, more informed, nearer the ideal (whatever that might be), can read (perform) the poem or the story for us” (Rosenblatt, 1978, pg.141).

Synthesizing the Literature on Reader-Response Theory in the Classroom

Perhaps without realizing that they are doing so, teachers are already practicing some sort of reader-response theory with their students, just as I was by assigning my grade 11 students an independent reading assignment that resulted in Dawood’s meditation on Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*. Still, empirical research that documents, details, and problematizes reader-response theory methods as they are used in formal educational spaces is sorely lacking. In the previous section of this article, I conducted what may be read as a literature review but what is more so, for me, the mapping and making of a philosophy of teaching through a continuum of historical inquiry into the notion of how literary reading happens and *means* for different readers. How would I then apply this theorizing of reader-response to teaching and/or assessing Dawood’s responses to the *Season of Migration to the North* and how would I use it in future lessons and classroom assignments? In this next section, I turn to what has been done and how it might inform the work that still needs to be done in inquiry using reader-response theory for language learners.

In terms of seminal works, we might consider Norman N. Holland *The Nature of Literary Response: 5 Readers Reading* (1975) in which he demonstrates how 5 readers respond in very different ways to the same texts. His qualitative methodology has 5 university students give free association responses to three short stories and his analysis of their responses utilizes psychoanalytical framework to conclude that the way they make meaning from the texts is through their subjective reader identities. Holland draws heavily on prior work by David Bleich, who published *Subjective Criticism* in 1978. In it, he documents his data collection over a longitudinal study where, for over 15 years, he had

been collecting statements from students about their feelings and associations regarding texts. He used his findings to theorize about the reading process and argued that his classes 'generated' knowledge -- particularly knowledge of how particular persons recreate texts (Bleich, 1978). Ultimately, Bleich's work brings reader-response from a more expansive view towards the realm of reader psychoanalysis. *The I* (Holland, 1985) further extends this notion of psychoanalysis in reader-response by proposing an elaborate 'mind model' that works within a psychological context to illustrate how readers making meaning from texts they read both use and are confined by a number of factors: their identities, bodies, cultures, and interpretive communities (ala Fish, 1980).

It is interesting to note that in looking at the classroom communities that might (just a bit more than others) have conducted more empirical studies in the realm of reader-response, the foreign language classroom rises above the others as it seems more willing to document the process. Hirvela (1996) distinguishes between reader-response and personal-response approaches, stating that the latter privileges the authority of the text while the former places agency in the hands of the student. He finds that the inclusion of reader-response theory in literature based communicative language teaching strengthens such instruction. Kim (2004) analyzed the interactions of nine L2 students with a literary text and with other group members to try and determine how said interactions impacted the learners' reading experiences and their language development through discourse with others about their reading experiences. Analysis showed that the students developed diverse, insightful responses concerning literal comprehension, personal connections, cross-cultural themes, interpretation, and evaluation of the text. It also revealed that the students were engaged in highly dialogic social interactions in the target language.

Davis (1990) argues for a pedagogical theory that takes into account cultural and linguistic factors and provides lesson frameworks meant to encourage students to produce their own meanings. *Teaching Literature* (Carter & Long, 1991) represents the move, especially in second language education, away from testing knowledge of the canon and tradition, and toward reading skills and the assessment of response, which is, of course, a controversial issue because it might work to unseat what readers and teachers think about as being great literature that is 'worthy' of teaching spaces. In "Beyond Orality: Investigating Literacy and the Literary in Second and Foreign Language Instruction," Kern and Schultz (2005) call for a context-sensitive, integrative approach to research on reading, writing, and related text-based practices in second language acquisition. The role of the literary in university-level foreign language classrooms, they argue, must take on new importance in terms of its potential impact on the development of second language literature literacy. Through socially and culturally embedded literacy, the role of the literary, or that material which is traditionally taught in language classrooms, takes on new importance in terms of its potential impact on the development of second language literacy. This means that methodologically researchers should incorporate an agenda that highlights qualitative approaches. They ask empirical studies to consider literacy not as "universal psycholinguistic processes but as constellations of social, cognitive, and linguistic practices that vary with situational and cultural contexts and that are learned through apprenticeship" (Kern & Shultz, 2005).

Many and Cox (1992) examine the diverse ways in which theoretical principles and varying frameworks have investigated reader stance in the teaching of literature. In their volume, *Reader stance and literary understanding: Exploring the theories, research, and*

practice, the authors are clearly inspired by Rosenblatt's transactional theory, as are other contributors to the volume. They take for instance, as a case study, three readers' responses to one book: *The Summer of the Swans*. Classification systems are developed to characterize stance on an 'efferent' to 'aesthetic' continuum, and level of personal understanding reached by each reader. Levels revealed that the higher the use of an aesthetic stance (when responders focused on the lived-through experience of the work) was associated with significantly higher levels of understanding as well. This particular study and others in the volume clearly provide empirical support for the theories of Rosenblatt and other reader-response critics. Yet, it is an older volume and the studies (as much as they try to describe the process of what reader-response in the classroom looks like empirically) end up reading more along the lines of a cheerleading piece on the benefits of reader-response. The studies then are not fascinating or surprising since we, as readers, would have expected as much since they seem designed to reinforce the discourse wherein the authors, as proponents of reader-response criticism, have already been engaging.

For teachers looking to incorporate reader-response in the classroom, curriculum materials abound. Karolides's (1992) volume defines a number of how-to strategies that demonstrate what reader-response pedagogy might look like in practice. It too draws heavily on Rosenblatt's model. The issue for me, however, concerns how a transactional model might work to essentialize the value in and philosophical underpinnings of reader-response, the discussions that were brought up by theorists in my historically inclined quest to define the term itself. Certainly, the transactional model considers the "reciprocal, mutually defining relationship" (Rosenblatt, 1978) between the reader and the literary text but how does the empirical research in the field (limited as it is) grapple with the greater philosophical questions about literature that reader-response seeks to allow for? And what might that look like in my classroom practice?

Dawood's Reading Juxtaposed with his Father's Reading and with Mine

In this section of the paper, I draw on three of Dawood's responses to the text in relation to my own notes taken during the time of his independent reading project. While I did not explicitly speak to Dawood's father about the novel, Dawood's responses to it were tied to his father's initial recommendation and the discussions they had about it while he was reading the translated version of the novel his father had read in the original Arabic. I should note that because Dawood was an English language learner, he explicitly chose to work with *Season of Migration to the North* because there was, an Arabic version of the text (its original publication language) in his home. Dawood felt like if he had any difficulties with the English, the Arabic version would be close at hand for comparison purposes. I agreed but read the book in English only myself.

Task number 1 of the independent reading project involved finding a quotation from the text and commenting on it. Dawood chose the following:

Over there is like here, neither better nor worse. But I am from here, just as the date palm standing in the courtyard of our house has grown in our house and not in anyone else's. The fact that they came to our land, I know not why, does that mean we should poison our present and future? (Salih, 2009, p. 41).

In his response, Dawood discussed how coming to Canada at the age of 15 had been strange. He had not been able to finish high school in his country of birth and had not fit into life in a Canadian high school well either. While subsequent years made him feel better and his love of his adopted homeland had grown, he still dreamt about going back to his roots. He talked about how after the war there was done, he would go back because it was home. Dawood mentioned that Canada was beautiful in many ways but there were problems here too – that the affordable housing he was living in here with his family was not as nice as the house his grandparents had back in his country. He said that he could relate to this quotation from *Season's* narrator because it was if he could have said it himself, as if he would have explained his positionality, his immigration struggles and subsequent awareness of his identity in his estimation of his family's diaspora in the same way. "Teacher," Dawood said to me, "My grandparents have a date palm in their house garden. When I read this quote, I saw it clearly in my mind."

I too had earmarked this page and thought the quotation significant but had not seen it as an identity or positionality marker; rather, I looked at it in the wake of the so-called "Arab Spring" revolutions in the Middle East that had been making news headlines at the time and through my own readings on colonialism for graduate school classes. For me this quote was representative of the complexity of nation-state building in relation to narratives (Bhabha, 1990) and the lingering traumas that postcolonial novels are concerned with (Sorensen, 2010). My reader response to the quotation included amazement at how succinctly it put into question form the intentionality of theoretical Afrofuturism (Yaszek, 2006), even as *Season of Migration to the North's* literary genre is far removed from technology discussions. In the margin on the page in which this quotation appears, I had put in a note to myself that read: *Paper idea- compare this novel with one of Octavia Butler's works.* And while I have yet to write that paper, this note demonstrates that even as I was reading the novel as a teacher to assess Dawood's reading of it, my graduate student/researcher self could not be removed from my responses to it.

Task number 2 of the independent reading project involved answering the question: What did you find to be problematic about the novel? In his reply, Dawood wrote about how he uncomfortable he was with the sex scenes:

When I had trouble with the English I can take his copy and understand it better in Arabic but sometimes it was embarrassing (sic) with the bad parts of the men and women doing sex. In our culture, we don't talk about this too much. My father told me that he forgets how the book had bad parts and he should have told me to read a different book.

Dawood's comment demonstrated how integrated his personal reading response was with cultural and familial norms that cannot be essentialized. Although I did not speak to his father to garner how much he regretted recommending the book to his son or was embarrassed by what he deemed as its "inappropriate" parts, the situation did call to mind discussions I have had with students at a college class I teach in children's literature. Many of my students in that class are training to be early childhood educators and find that many children's authors cannot completely forget the adults that they are when writing. This means that beyond picture books, many texts acquiesce to the fact that adults may be reading over their child's shoulders or enjoying the books themselves and would like to be

entertained as well. Indeed, popular Disney movies are quick to promote a production based on its appeal for “everyone in the family.” For example, one student recently referenced the *Lion King’s* sequence of Timon dressed in drag during the hula. While a young child might not understand the scene through more critical adult critique, the levels of meaning are indicative of how complex reader responses can be and usually are.

Task number 3 of the independent reading project involved looking for an allusion in the novel and commenting on how big of a part the allusion does or does not play in the narrative. This task emerges from my thoughts and readings on what Kristeva (1980) terms as *intertextuality* or the interrelationship between texts insofar as they are constructed and transformed through the constructs and transformations of other texts. Kristeva argued that all sign/signifying systems are comprised of the ways in which they draw from and transform previous sign/signifying systems; but they are also bound by an author and reader’s own subjectivity and worlds in the meaning-making process. As such, allusion in literary studies is defined as a reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance and the impetus is on readers to contextualize an allusion’s importance to a text. For this task, Dawood chose to write about the character of Mustapha who aligns himself and his experiences in relation to Shakespeare’s Othello, the Moor, who manages to marry the fair Desdemona and then kills her when he is convinced that she has been unfaithful to him. Dawood argued that like Othello is accepted in British society for his wisdom in battle, Mustafa is accepted by the English for his intellect and given a scholarship to study economics in England. Furthermore, like Othello is loved by Desdemona because of his interesting stories and mysterious ways, Mustafa is loved by the English women he seduces because they, like Desdemona, find him alluring.

Indeed, the comparisons between Othello and Mustafa are many and the utilization of this particular allusion is particularly thought-provoking. Still, Mustafa at one point states, “I am no Othello. I am a lie” (Salih, 2009, p.29) and at another point he says, “I am no Othello. Othello was a lie” (Salih, 2009, p.91). In my undergraduate days as an English student, I wrote a couple of essays on Shakespeare’s *Othello* myself but I had never considered the character from a postcolonial viewpoint, nor did I recognize that Salih’s rereading of the legendary character even existed. To me, that demonstrated the author’s own reading response; Salih himself was considering Othello through his education in British schools and how the creation of the Moor drew on and coloured orientalist (Said, 1979) perceptions of African men in the West. Mustafa’s thought then on how he is unlike Othello but how at one point he is the lie and at another Othello is the lie is a comment, to me, on how representations are distorted and how identities are constructed through and despite these distortions. My reading response to this aspect of the text, based on my own reading of the original play as an undergraduate with little exposure to postcolonial criticism and then as a graduate student exposed to the work of literary theorists like Said (1978) and Bhabha (1990) meant that for me a straight up comparison between Othello and Mustafa, like Dawood had done for task number 3, was inadequate. By saying that he was unlike Othello, that one or the other was a lie, Mustafa was demonstrating how the allusion required a more complex process of deconstruction in order to touch upon the meaning. Still, no matter how much I embraced the idea that Salih was almost reinventing Othello for his readers, as a teacher, I had to recognize that my reading of the novel in this regard could not impact my assessment of Dawood’s response. As much as I wanted him to offer a more critical reading of the allusion for task number 3, I needed to see that the most I

could advance in the span of the project's time period was to ask questions that might make him question his responses. I could model this by demonstrating my own probing of the character of Othello through previous, non-critical exposure to him and juxtaposing my thoughts with the newer ones that I had taken away from Salih's allusion to Shakespeare's hero. I had to recognize that opposing viewpoints and answers between us on the 3 tasks is important insofar as it established the centrality of reader-response theory to my pedagogical practice during the independent study unit.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate that there is disjointedness between the theorization of reader-response theory (as understood through its literary and historical contexts) and empirical data to demonstrate its use in language learning. By 'use,' I did not intend it to only mean that language teachers should use it to teach their students because it is an efficient pedagogy; rather, I held that the use of reader-response means that through engagement and dialogical interaction amongst a community of readers (whether in the classroom or outside of it as was the case with Dawood and his father), meaning (as ephemeral and complex as it may be) making happens. If reader-response can be conceived of as a way to engage students, to give them opportunities to express their own opinions and ideas, to help them forefront their own reactions to language, then what means of regular and deep practice is required to propel them (and ourselves!) to a form of literacy that is not only competent and critical but also comprehensive in its ability to allow for engagement in the world of and with other readers?

Reader-response theory can be thought of as another way to conceptualize the usefulness of problem-posing educational paradigms (Freire, 1970) and dialogic interactions in relation to individual responses to a text under study. Bakhtin writes:

Internally persuasive discourse ...is, as it affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with 'one's own word'...Its creativity and productiveness consists precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses or our words from within...More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345)

Although my student, Dawood, did not articulate what was happening in his reaction to Salih's work as Bakhtin describes, thinking about his paper and the layers of reactions to the text between him, his father and my own reading of it, it is clear that there very well is a struggle that occurs. Reader-response is not a clear-cut answer to meaning-making but a vigorous process that is multi-faceted and complex. Reader response theory underscores the importance of the reader in interpretive acts and prioritizes the individual's ability for meaning-making. It requires us to ask questions like: How do we feel when we read a certain poem, or a novel? Why do we feel that way? How does our psychology affect the way we read literary texts? How does each of us read differently? Only when we ask those questions, I think, can we truly begin to understand literature's 'truth' - or whatever that

truth might be for each of us. But apart from literature (capital L), reading *anything* in a classroom setting is a subjective experience, and how we personally react to different texts is significant. Knowing this is meaningful, particularly for teachers with students who are language learners struggling to make meaning from literary texts.

The layers of meaning making that are demonstrated in relation to the 3 tasks Dawood undertook in his independent reading project about Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* demonstrated to me that more practitioner research in language learning will help bridge the disconnect between theorizing reader response and demonstrating its pedagogical usefulness. After the initial search for studies that have bridged the disconnect between reader response theory and praxis demonstrated their glaring scarcity, and after my own study attempted to do this very thing, I recognize that perhaps the lack is due to the impossibility of fully articulating the nuances of individual responses to a novel. Researchers who have attempted to do so may soon realize that unless they are willing to engage with deeper phenomenological (Van Manen, 2014) questions and interdisciplinary ideas, theirs will be a difficult task. In the first section of this paper when I attempted to define the complexity of reader-response, I drew on a number of disciplines: history, literary criticism, education, sociology. Initially, my intent was not to draw on all of these, but only to build a bridge between theoretical literary criticism and educational practice. The more immersed in the theory I became, however, the more I realized that to confine the topic to two domains, while not impossible, may do a disservice to the very spirit and polyphony of voices that reader-response seeks to include. How then, I am left to ask, can reader-response continually inform our very teaching philosophies?

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