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*Towards Critical Literacy:
Literature and teachers' reactions to
reader-response theories*

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Abstract

Much poststructuralist literary theory, in particular that derived from *reader-response* theories, points to the need for the development in readers of a more *critical literacy*. Earlier researchers and educators in the field of *reader-response* theories, indicated a move away from the New Critics' structuralist focus on the author's intention and a text-based meaning, to acknowledge the *active* role of the student/reader in the creation of meaning. Enlarging on the subjective role of the student/reader, later researchers, in particular the Social and Cultural theorists, introduced a more critical element by focusing on the importance of context itself. Further studies, under the influence of Foucault, developed this focus to include the idea that author, text and reader are constructed by *discourses*. A renewed awareness of how texts actually work and of the power inherent in all language, has led to the emergence of *critical literacy*.

This research, working on the premise that practice often lags behind theory, examines constraints that may inhibit the development of *critical literacy* (through teaching with literature) in the New Zealand contexts of both secondary English (including classrooms with mainstreamed ESOL¹ students) and ESOL (from a range of institutions). Two surveys, one for each teaching context, analyse teachers' reactions to concepts of *reader-response* theories with a view to determining the nature and prevalence of these constraints.

The analysis reveals that in the mainstream context, constraints emerge in the areas of curriculum design (including examination and assessment procedures), teacher education, and students' receptivity while in the ESOL context, curriculum design and teacher development are significant. The ESOL context also reveals that there

¹ ESOL: English to speakers of other languages.

is a paucity of teaching with literature in language classrooms which means that the vehicle for the development of *critical literacy*, is denied students.

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
CHAPTER ONE	1
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Interpretation and critical review	2
1.2 The research, results and discussion	7
CHAPTER TWO	9
TEACHING WITH LITERATURE	9
2.1 Introduction.....	9
2.2 Why literature?	10
2.3 Further claims for literature.....	12
2.4 Why teach with literature in the ESOL classroom?	13
2.5 Teacher variables in the ESOL context	17
2.6 Summary	21
CHAPTER THREE	22
RESPONSE THEORIES	22
3.1 Personal-response. Where did it come from?.....	22
3.2 The New Zealand context.....	26
3.3 The limitations of personal-response	28
3.4 Summary	31
CHAPTER FOUR	33
READER-RESPONSE THEORIES	33
4.1 Differences and similarities.....	33
4.2 Active readers	35
4.2.1 Reader-response criticism. From formalism to post-structuralism	41
4.2.2 Textual Theories	42
4.2.3 Experiential Theories	44
4.2.5 Social Theories	46

4.2.6 Cultural Theories	48
4.3 What does this mean for teachers?.....	49
CHAPTER FIVE	50
ENGLISH IN AOTEAROA.....	50
5.1 Introduction.....	50
5.2 Literacy as a way of thinking.....	51
5.3 Other related issues.....	55
5.4 Summary	57
CHAPTER SIX	59
METHODOLOGY	59
6.1 Introduction.....	59
6.1.1 Mainstream context	60
6.1.2 ESOL context.....	60
6.2 Approach to the research.....	61
6.2.1 Preliminary trials	61
6.3 Research design	62
6.3.1 NZATE survey.....	63
6.3.1.1 NZATE questionnaire design.....	65
6.3.2 ESOL survey.....	66
6.3.2.1 ESOL questionnaire design.....	66
6.4 Data analysis	67
6.4.1 Inter-rater agreement	68
CHAPTER SEVEN	69
RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS	69
7.1 NZATE survey data.....	69
7.1.1 Teachers' familiarity with and use of reader-response theories.....	70
7.1.2 Constraints	78
7.1.2.1 Differences in approaches with juniors and seniors; L1 and mainstreamed L2	80
7.1.2.2 Further problems facing the regular English teacher.....	82
7.2 ESOL survey data.....	84
7.2.1 Working with literature	85
7.2.2 Literature focus in the ESOL classroom.....	87
7.2.3 Familiarity and use of reader-response concepts	88
7.3 Conclusion	90
CHAPTER EIGHT.....	91
DISCUSSION	91
8.1 Limitations	91

8.2 Mainstreamed secondary English context	93
8.2.1 Personal-response and reader-response. How are these perceived?.....	93
8.2.2 Constraints preventing the development of critical literacy in mainstream classrooms	96
8.2.2.1 Curriculum	96
8.2.2.2 Students' receptivity.....	98
8.3 ESOL context across primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.....	98
8.3.1 Literature: How much and what?.....	98
8.3.2 Teachers' understanding of response theories.....	99
8.3.3 Constraints preventing the development of critical literacy in the ESOL context	101
8.4 Are the constraints different for the two contexts?	103
CHAPTER NINE.....	104
CONCLUSION.....	104
APPENDICES.....	107
APPENDIX A: NZATE Survey questionnaire.....	107
APPENDIX B: Information about the survey	111
APPENDIX C: ESOL Survey questionnaire.....	112
APPENDIX D: Information about the survey	114
APPENDIX E: Percentage of teachers and the essential use of handout material to ensure access to the best ideas	115
APPENDIX F: Table F 1: Percentage of teachers and a breakdown of professional development training	116
APPENDIX G: Table G 1: Percentage of each genre by learning institution.....	117
Table G 2: Frequency of responses in each genre	117
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	118

List of Figures

Fig 1: Five perspectives on the reader/text/context transaction.....	41
Fig 2: Frequency of familiarity with and use of response theory concepts in mainstream English...	71
Fig 3: Frequency of familiarity with and use of response theory concepts in the language classroom	89

List of Tables

Table 1: Inter-rater agreement for questions tested.....	68
Table 2: Frequency of NZATE respondents according to age and gender.....	69
Table 3: Frequency of familiarity with and use of response theory concepts in mainstream English	71
Table 4: Percentage of teachers and approaches to teaching with literature.....	74
Table 5: Percentage of teachers and awareness of alternative approaches to teaching with literature	77
Table 6: Percentage of problem areas encountered by teachers of mainstreamed ESOL students	83
Table 7: Frequency of ESOL respondents according to age, gender and learning institution.....	84
Table 8: Frequency (F) and percentage of time spent teaching in 4 categories of literature in the language classroom.....	85
Table 9: Frequency (F) and percentage of literary resources used.....	87
Table 10: Percentage of approaches to teaching with literature in the language classroom.....	88
Table 11 Frequency of familiarity with and use of response theory concepts in the language classroom.....	89

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

This study examines constraints that inhibit the development of critical literacy and posits the idea that through teaching with literature¹ employing a humanistic, response-theory based approach, these constraints can be overcome. The study encompasses the two contexts of both mainstream secondary English and a range of classrooms for English to speakers of other languages (ESOL), including primary, secondary and tertiary throughout New Zealand. Whether or not there are differences in the constraints between these two contexts is also examined. In summary then the following theses are proposed:

1. Teachers' use of and familiarity with reader-response theories is limited.
2. There are constraints operating in both mainstream and ESOL English classrooms preventing the development of critical literacy.
3. The constraints are different in each context.

Before outlining the chapters that follow, it is important to make three points of clarification. Firstly, a *humanistic* approach in education, is defined for the purposes of this study as stated by Peter Grundy (1994), namely "one in which the learner and learning are privileged over the subject being studied and in which respect for self and others is developed" (p. 42). Although Grundy elaborates

¹ Throughout this study I use the phrase *teaching with literature* rather than *teaching literature*. The reason for this is not to split hairs but to acknowledge the fact that literature can be used for a number of purposes and *teaching literature* can only possibly apply where there is an objective body of knowledge to impart. Further, *teaching with literature* acknowledges the move away from teacher-directed to learner-centred classrooms.

further on his own definition, and is referring to a humanistic approach in respect to language teaching only, I am satisfied that what he says here adequately covers both contexts of this study.

The second point for clarification centres on *critical literacy* per se, which is not the subject of this study. Rather, viable means of teaching towards critical literacy are what is being examined. This study is based on the personal belief that critical literacy is a desirable outcome for all students, critical literacy being the awareness that

all texts are motivated – there is no neutral position from which a text can be read or written. All language, all text, all discourse thus ‘refracts’ the world; bending, shaping, constructing particular versions of the social and natural world that act in the interests of particular class, gender, and cultural groups. (Voloshinov, 1986, cited in Muspratt, Luke and Freebody, 1997, p. 193)

The third point concerns the exploratory nature of this work, certain elements of which are close to a conceptual study. The first five chapters present much of the work undertaken and offer both an interpretation and a critical review of many key concepts, while examining some of the different approaches to teaching literature. A more traditional literature review would provide background information on research questions, highlight problems that may be encountered and outline the views and results of other researchers (Nunan, 1992). To my knowledge, no research has been carried out in the New Zealand classroom on either the development of critical literacy, or the extent to which reader-response theories are employed by teachers.

1.1 Interpretation and critical review

Chapter 2 examines teaching with literature which provides the twofold function of firstly engaging students affectively, thus making a humanistic teaching pedagogy possible, and secondly providing texts (samples of authentic discourse) which lend themselves to critical analysis. The chapter begins with a working definition of literature, drawing attention to the teacher’s purpose in selecting a

particular text, and elaborating on the three broad categories and central motifs of *text as artefact*, *text as linguistic resource* and *text as discourse*, which arose from a distinction made by A. Maley (1989) between academic *study* and linguistic resource or *use*. The question of *why* teach with literature is then examined in more detail; because the answer to this question has its genesis in historical roots, and because the major current constraint (i.e. outmoded teaching pedagogy) is linked to earlier literary theories, an historical, though far from exhaustive, overview is provided. In discussing further claims for teaching with literature, an important concept, the synonymy between language and power is introduced, thus cautioning against an uncritical approach to the worlds and behaviours *mirrored* in literature. The section that follows, dealing with teaching with literature in the ESOL context also refers to the importance of a critical approach and further investigates the beneficial link made by both Collie and Slater (1998, p. 5), and John McRae (1996, p.19) between engaging imaginatively with literature, and second language learning.

Finally, this chapter raises issues concerning teacher variables, as whether or not a teacher chooses to teach with literature in an ESOL context is dependant upon such factors as teaching philosophy, perceived classroom role, level of expertise and confidence. Both sides of the argument regarding the teacher's role and the place of interpersonal relationships in the classroom, which Carl Rogers (see H. D. Brown, 1994, p. 86) maintains is critical to the facilitation of *learning* as opposed to teacher-directed *teaching*, are also investigated. What emerges in this chapter is that literature offers a rich learning resource in both contexts for the development of critical literacy but within teaching with literature itself many constraints arise, not least being those concerned with differing theoretical stances regarding both classroom practice and literary criticism. Chapters 3 and 4 explore in some detail these theoretical stances, focusing on what are generically referred to as response theories.

Chapter 3, Response Theories, begins by setting out a distinction between personal-response, a teaching strategy that is currently pervasive throughout mainstream classrooms in New Zealand and its lesser known half-sibling, the

theoretically based reader-response. In much of the relevant literature, these two are used interchangeably but this study maintains that in clarifying a distinction between them we can come to a better understanding of a significant constraint facing teachers, namely a lack of professional development in the area of reader-response theories which the focus on personal-response has exacerbated. An examination of reader-response theories is pursued in chapter 4; meanwhile the development of personal-response from its historical beginnings in the Anglo-American 1966 Dartmouth (USA) Seminar, its influence on the changing role of teachers, its growth in the thinking and practice of New Zealand teachers, and finally its limitations regarding the development of critical literacy are examined in chapter 3.

Personal-response grew from the personal-growth model of teaching which, introduced at the Dartmouth Seminar, came to replace the functional skills model and the cultural-heritage model. The benefits inherent in the personal-growth model were those that stemmed from a new emphasis on teaching *processes* which focused on the subjective *voice* of each student. This heralded a radical move away from the well-intentioned though didactic practices of the cultural-heritage model, which through the study of so-called literary *Greats* and a *text as artefact* teaching methodology, sought the betterment of the middle and lower classes through moral instruction (see Eagleton, 1996, pp. 19-26). Key elements in the personal-growth model together with the influence at this seminar of early response theorists and educators such as James Britton and John Dixon are examined in some detail so that it becomes more apparent why personal-response has had such a huge impact on teaching practice.

However, although personal-response has had a huge impact on teaching practices in both contexts (even beyond the English classroom) and continues to guide teachers ever more towards student-centred learning, it has tended to remain trapped in a *text as artefact* approach when it comes to teaching with literature. This means that the student is not truly *active* in creating meaning as the teachers already have a single text-based meaning in their heads which students play the game of guessing at and then mimicking. What students respond to, relating

personal experiences wherever appropriate, is this teacher-determined meaning. As we will see later in 3.2 and 7.1.1, these responses *are* valued however, and the emotional growth of students *is* being facilitated but if students are not actively involved in creating and critiquing meanings for themselves (well supported by the text needless to say) then their cognitive development will be hampered and subsequently their ability to bridge the gap between a personal engagement with text and writing a transactional piece for assessment will be affected. Reader-response theories, especially those which adopt a poststructuralist approach, offer some solutions to this problem.

Chapter 4 develops further some of the strands introduced in chapter three, notably the differences and similarities between personal and reader-response and the reasons for these, which are seen to lie in their partially separate origins; in historical factors such as the earlier dominance of structuralism; and their pursuance of different pathways, teaching practice and theory respectively. When it comes to teaching with literature however, personal-response has dominated practice, even though it has created for itself the catch 22 situation of being bound to a pre-determined text-based meaning while at the same time committed to encouraging the student's *voice*. It is this bind which has rendered the student a passive participant, responding personally, even creatively, but not as far as the creation of meaning is concerned. Although reader-response theories have solutions to offer, they have not lent themselves to wide dissemination in the classroom possibly because, as Richard Beach (1993) suggests, they failed to "*specify* social and cognitive processes" (p. 3); hence a lag exists between theory and practice. This may be the case. Regardless, it is true that reader-response theories have remained in relative obscurity; this, together with the problems of personal-response, is to the detriment of the development of critical literacy. Recognising the drawbacks of personal-response, however, will provide the momentum to approach reader-response theories, central to which is the active and reflective role of the reader, who becomes cognizant of the influences surrounding *text as discourse*.

After analysing this issue, chapter 4 proceeds with a detailed examination of reader-response theories, drawing attention to ways a teacher can encourage the more *active* involvement of students with literary texts. Roland Barthes' (1988) poststructuralist concept of the death of the author making way for the birth of the reader is examined, together with discussion of three strategies Ray Misson (1994) posits as means of ensuring "some stability within the process of reading texts" (p.36), if we are to avoid solipsism.² The answers suggested lie in firstly the idea of "super readers", those who are so well informed about literary conventions that they know implicitly what the text intends (such readers are scarcely viable in a reader-response world). Secondly, Wolfgang Iser (1980) and Louise Rosenblatt (1983, 1994) both acknowledge the determinative role of the text as providing stability (see 4.2) but also insist on the importance of an active role for the reader. Iser's theory concerning "elements of indeterminacy" allows for the imaginative involvement of the reader, while Louise Rosenblatt's (1983, 1994) transactional theory of reading emphasises the "transaction" between the text and the reader as a thinking and feeling individual with a personal history, to produce the "poem" or evoked work. The third strategy for ensuring stability is to recognise, as Stanley Fish (see Beach, 1993, p.38) believes, that although the text itself is indeterminate, the reader is constrained by what Fish calls the *interpretative community* and it is this socially constructed community which collectively determines the meaning.

Fish's theory is valuable in that it introduces the role of context in what Beach (1993) describes as a "reader/text/context transaction" (p.8), and invites us to examine the role of the reader critically. In reader-response theories all three categories of reader, text, and context are involved to a greater or lesser extent in the creation of meaning, dependant largely on the degree to which they are influenced by either structuralist or poststructuralist thinking. Chapter 4 continues by examining five reader-response perspectives: Textual Theories, Experiential Theories, Psychological Theories, Social Theories and finally Cultural Theories.

² Solipsism: "Philos. The view that the self is all that exists or can be known" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary. Ninth edition, 1995).

The strengths and limitations of each are pointed out, as is the movement towards the more global effects of poststructuralism (see Beach 1993), while a case is built for the adoption of the best concepts available to assist in the development of critical literacy. Finally this chapter, looking briefly at what all this means for teachers, suggests that an eclectic and informed approach, mindful of the goal of critical literacy, will serve students well.

Chapter 5, the last in the critical review section, looks specifically at the status quo underlying *theoretical* knowledge of teaching with literature and literary theory in New Zealand, as reflected in ten years of *English in Aotearoa* publications. What emerges through the pertinent articles is a clear indication that those writers/educators mostly involved with tertiary education (such as teacher education) are not only familiar with but are also committed to advancing knowledge in the field of poststructural literary theories, several writers offering practical suggestions within the body of their papers, largely in the form of questioning strategies to assist teachers with implementing theory into practice. Although reader-response theories per se are rarely named, key concepts such as the *active reader* and the need to develop *critical competence* are. Further, one writer (Sheehan, 1996) makes a plea for an objective set of values to guide the formation of critical judgements; personal-response or feelings are “important” but are not enough on their own.

1.2 The research, results and discussion

Chapter 6, Methodology, outlines the approach to the research undertaken, which sought to investigate the status quo of *practices* underlying teaching with literature in New Zealand. Included in this chapter are details of the two questionnaires used to gather data and a section on how the data were analysed. This is followed by chapter 7, Results and Observations, which indicates certain trends, discerned through the analysis of the quantitative data, and general impressions gathered of teachers’ understanding of their practices conveyed through the use of direct quotes. In section 7.2, which presents the results of the ESOL survey, it becomes apparent that most of the data presented are more representative of secondary

schools and tertiary institutions³ than they are of primary schools or private providers. What this means is that the “range” of ESOL classrooms alluded to in the opening paragraph of this chapter, is by no means evenly distributed.

Chapter 8, Discussion, focuses on the wider issues raised by the results, in particular those which can be clearly linked to salient issues in earlier chapters regarding reader-response theories. Also in this chapter, certain broad categories of constraints emerge namely, *teacher development, curriculum, and students' receptivity* all of which are applicable to the mainstream secondary English classroom. However, in the ESOL context, only the first two apply but with different emphasis. Finally, chapter 9, Conclusion, focuses on the implications of the study.

³ Of the tertiary institutions represented, 50% were from Polytechnics, 23% were from Universities, a small 7% from Colleges of Education and the balance were unspecified.