"No More Being Stuck" in Reading Literature: Effects of Reader Response Journal Project on EFL Teacher Trainees' Literacy Engagement

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*Abstract---***The study aims to explore the application of reader response journals to help EFL readers get out from the 'being stuck condition' in interpreting literary works. Underpinned by the interplay of Reader Response Theory, Socio-constructivism, and Critical Pedagogy, the study promotes EFL readers' aesthetic stances to have their own 'convenient rooms' to (re)create meaning in transacting with texts as illuminated by their schemata and life experiences, which is contrast to New Critics' views that promote text-based analysis only. An intact group of EFL teacher trainees of an Indonesian private teacher college taking literary criticism participated in this program evaluation-based case study to uncover the observed classroom dynamics representing the trainees' reading and enjoying literary works, and responding to assigned literary works by means of response journals. In applying the one-semester course program, the trainees were triggered to individually and collaboratively share ideas, feelings, wants, interests, and expectations, and peer-feedback their written responses as reflected in on-going revised journals. The peer-led discussions characterized the classroom interaction driven by the teacher's (tutor's) guiding steps, as the scaffolding techniques. The study showed the nonthreatening classroom interaction and the trainees' development of using varied critical and personal reader response strategies. The trainees' captured 'voices' as reflected in peer-led discussions and their journals represented their freedom in expressing ideas, and enjoyment in reading-writing (literacy) events. The study suggests further studies investigate e-journaling project that entails possibilities of enhancing trainees' multiliteracies.**

Keywords: Reader Response Theory, response journal, freedom, engagement, literacies

I. INTRODUCTION

It seems that most classroom activities of literature instruction are normally dependent on the teachers' appropriately selected pedagogy or approaches to teaching that will influence EFL students' stances to reading activities. Much research reports on reading stances indicating that text-oriented pedagogy as influenced by New Critics tends to lead to teacher-centered classroom that makes students passive readers. The direction of New Criticism as the mainstream pedagogy has shifted to reader-oriented trend [1] enabling students to be more active. Yet, in most cases, reading activities in literature classes in EFL contexts have generally led to only moral values examination and right interpretations that possibly caused readers' boredom [2] and thus literature is not popular among students for its nonliterary treatments [3]. On the other hand, reader-oriented pedagogy can stipulate readers' personal involvement as well as engagement [4]. Reader-oriented trend as influenced by Rosenblatt's [5, 6] Reader Response Theory promotes student-centered classroom trend that empowers students to be active meaning makers. Other studies, for examples, [7], [8], [9], [10], and [11] strongly argued that teachers' decisions in choosing teaching stances of text or reader-oriented stances drove students into meaningfully engaging classrooms with rich reading-writing events.

Through reader response-driven reading interpretation of text readers as active meaning makers have more 'rooms' in manifesting their autonomy in self-empowering in learning [12], [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20] as well as aesthetic reading in transacting ideas with texts with their 'lived through experiences' [21] and being imbued with their own personalities and character traits, their individual experiences and memories, and cultural backgrounds [22].

Considering the importance of Reader Response Theory application at most levels of education, the necessity of introducing response-based teaching is then central to the realm of teacher professional development. Much research has suggested the implementation of Reader Response Theory through reader response journal (RRJ) at EFL teacher education. Asselin's [23] study on pre-service teachers' self- reflection on enjoying literary works by means of Reader Response Theory revealed that the trainees got enhancements in identifying, shaping, and enriching varied response and pedagogical implication for their future teaching practices. More evidences of studies on EFL teachers' classroom practices and their experiences of getting response-based teaching have also supported the trends of response-based literature teaching at EFL teacher training that potentially offer its pedagogical

implications for the trainees' future teaching practices [24].

Through applying RRJ readers empirically can get better academic achievements [19]. RRJ can also trigger classroom dynamics and make the classroom members get actively immersed in positive and interactive contacts. The members are normally made possible to project their own personal and critical expressions through reading-writing-responding integration. Much research demonstrates how reader response journal project gives effects on (pre-service) teachers' literary engagements and language growths including its pedagogical implications for their future classroom practices. For example, McIntosh [24] reports that the teachers' past experiences of getting involved in the use of reader response journals affected their current classroom practices. In the case of Indonesian context of literature teaching practices, yet, literature tends to be a boring subject that causes 'being stuck condition' as the readers focus only on "re-examinations of overly simplistic moral lessons"(p. 106)[2], which is less challenging. In more specific sense, unfortunately, the teacher trainees at the research site were found to have low motivation in reading literary works for the sake of their required basic competence.

While the research directions and teaching trends of literature in ES/FL contexts have much shifted from text- to reader-oriented under the framework of RRT, the terrain of the response-based literature instruction still lacks proofs in the their ways of preparing and making it a 'down-to-earth' good classroom practice [25]. The present study is thus expected to contribute to road-mapping efforts of enriching research-based praxes of RRT as illuminated by qualitative endowments that might inform educators, language curriculum planners, pre-/in-service EFL teacher trainees, and school supervisors holistic portrayals of reader-response-based teaching pedagogy in EFL contexts. Drawing on the importance of RRJ project in making EFL teacher trainees engaged in the negotiated critical literacy events, the following two proposed research questions guide the study:

1. Does the use of RRJ shape the nonthreatening classrooms that enable the trainees to enjoyably share ideas, read, and write about literary works to get out from boredom and being stuck in interpreting literary works?
2. What kinds of response strategies do the trainees produce in engaging in reading-writing activities as affected by the use of RRJ?

II. THE NATURE OF RESPONSE-BASED TEACHING

A. Reader Response Theory

The reader-response driven literature classroom practices are pedagogically intertwined with aesthetic stances. Rosenblatt's [5, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32] RRT principles and Karolides's [33] reader response pedagogy highlight that, contrast to efferent approach that focuses more on text-investigation, aesthetic reading occurs when readers get involved in empowering themselves [34] by engaging in the story such as being the character/s/ and empathizing with the character/s/ [35]. Aesthetic reading stances of literary works basically embrace active readers in self-empowering in that they express what they feel when reading and have in mind [36, 37, 38, 39]. Aesthetic approaches to reading literary works tend to better benefit readers than efferent ones since the former offer more empowering drives than the latter in that the readers invest their mental and psychological capacities [40].

Reader response application also offers multifaceted benefits in terms of freedom in expressing ideas and democracy education [41] argues that through RRT as a landmark of education, readers as the society members learn how to be challenge themselves in adjusting themselves with diversity to get harmonious interaction in that their ways of aesthetic reading are influenced by the readers' personal accounts [42] and the culture portrayed in the text being enjoyed [43].

B. Reader Response Journal

Considering the importance of RRT application at most levels of education, the necessity of introducing RRT-based teaching is then central to the realm of teacher professionalism development. Much research has suggested the implementation of RRT through reader response journal (RRJ) at teacher education. Asselin's [23] study on pre-service teachers' self-reflection on enjoying lit works by means of RRT revealed that the trainees got enhancements in identifying, shaping, and enriching varied response and pedagogical implication for their future teaching practices. More evidences of studies on EFL teachers' classroom practices and their experiences of getting RRT indicate that response-based literature teaching at EFL teacher training offer its pedagogical implications for the trainees' future teaching practices [24].

Furthermore, RRJ potentially encourages readers as writers to freely and enjoyably express their personal and critical reflections including wants, interests, ideas and thoughts, and other personal reflections [44, 45] that originally represent readers' language capacity. Other studies also suggest the significances of the use of RRT [46, 47]. Parallel to those studies, Zainal's et al. [48] also affirm that the use of RRJ also indicated significantly positive

effects on their students' personal accounts and linguistic growths. Thus, the use of RRJ offers teacher trainees personal, linguistic, academic, and pedagogic significances [49, 50, 51]. In realizing reader response strategies, readers virtually use such possible modes as indicated by Beach and Marshall's (p. 137)[52], likely embracing seven reader response strategies that include engaging, describing, conceiving, explaining, interpreting, connecting, and judging. Specifically, Beach and Marshall (pp. 137-147)[52] further formulate each strategy: *engaging* relates to reader writer's articulating of emotional reaction and level of involvement; *describing* to restating or reproducing information; *conceiving* to moving beyond description; *explaining* to drawing on their concept of traits, beliefs, of characters, etc.; *connecting* to connecting his/her autobiographical accounts; *interpreting* to defining symbolic meaning of the theme and messages, and *judging* to expressing evaluative statesmen's. In other words, engaging, connecting, and judging can be indicatively personal, whereas conceiving, explaining, describing, and interpreting are more public.

C. *Socioconstructivism views and critical pedagogy in response-based teaching*

Under the Vygotsky's socio-constructivism views [53], the use of RRJ seems to trigger the classroom community to collaboratively share ideas and peer-feedback their own written responses as expressed in RRJ project. Scaffolding also occurs when the more (trainees) give constructive inputs or revisions to their works through ongoing drafting of the journal writing [54]. The classroom dynamics consequently encourages the classroom members to feel safe to express their voices and at the same time improve their target language use. Further, working in group (the so-called book clubs or literature circles) drives the classroom community to be creatively and responsibly independent learners of literature.

The philosophical basis of RRJ for pedagogical considerations corroborates the critical pedagogy and entails the practices of critical literacy. Research suggests that critical pedagogy emphasizes the empowerment of the readers as active meaning makers in that their self-directedness in learning illuminates their patterns of reading-responding-writing activities. For example, advocates of RRJ [55], [56] and [25] indicates that the concept of Freire's [57] critical pedagogy support the connection among literature teaching, empowering pedagogy, and critical literacy. In this way, critical literacy occurs when readers' process of interpreting involves critical thinking by exploring "social phenomena and their effect on human relations in order to acquire tools that enable them to explore critically traditional norms and values" (p. 683) [56]. Critical literacy, then, "promotes textual engagement that emphasizes

consuming (reading, listening, viewing), producing (writing, speaking, designing), and distributing texts for real-life purposes and audiences" (p. 123) [58].

The solid interplay among Reader Response Approach and RRJ in practice, socio-constructivism views, and critical pedagogy seems to indicate an offering of operational synergy of more comprehensive and integral pedagogy of teaching. The more the literature or reading instructors get more aware of prioritizing the aesthetic reader-approach pedagogy in the classrooms, the more empowered the students/trainees will be.

III. METHOD

The present study, following qualitative program evaluation-based case study [59]), portrayed the application of Reader Response Theory through RRJ project at EFL teacher training college with 'special case' of teaching literature, Literary criticism course, in an Indonesian context. The use of RRJ was basically intended to increase the trainees' low L2 (English) motivation in reading as well English literacy. Following Nunan's [60] tenet of program evaluation that covers both internal and external validity and reliability (p. 103), the study was based on systematic procedures of data collection and analysis through which the research gap, research questions, and theoretical framework have incorporated the present study. The study included observation, focus group sharing, self-reflected responses, and document analysis [61, 62, 63]. To get its reliability, the study has indicatively shown consistency and replicability (Nunan, 1992, p, 14) by corroborating the relevent strong supports of theoretical and empirical bases from the application of Reader Response Theory through writing RRJ.

An intact group comprising third year of pre-service EFL teacher trainees *(N=22)* of a private college in Ciamis, West Java, Indonesia, participated in the study. The trainees were assigned to read such selected modern short stories as: 1. *The Tell-Tale Heart* (Edgar Allan Poe)*, 2. The Spirit of Giving* (Maxine Chernoff)*, and 3. The Man Who Did not Smile* (Kate Chopin). Observable classroom dynamics when RRJ was applied showed the emerging themes of classroom atmospheres that triggered 'classroom criticism' events. The themes reflected each individual and group work engagements in RRJ project. In addition, samples of the trainees' final draft of written reader response journal were scrutinized to indicate their types of response strategies with reference to Beach and Marshall's [52] seven categorizations as the emerging themes.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

The emerging findings generally correspond to the thematic patterns of RRJ enactments concerning the two specific research questions proposed that entailed two major points: conducive and nonthreatening classroom atmosphere and varied reader response strategies. Yet, generally speaking, the study revealed that RRJ could enable the trainees to get immersed in the negotiated RRJ project in that the trainees gradually and personally as well as linguistically improved their target language.

1. Encountering *RQ1*: Conducive and nonthreatening classroom atmosphere

The study tried to empower the trainees as reluctant readers to get more opportunities to self-direct their own learning strategies. As focus group discussion revealed, the trainees' (as active readers') self-directedness of reading-writing events played an important role in creating interactive and democratic classroom that led to balanced distribution of power in taking parts of the negotiated classroom interaction. In addition, the observation showed the determinants of non-threatening condition implying that the trainees felt free in getting evoked to share ideas, to enjoy the project by having such happily personal reactions such laughs, to be relaxed in joining the courses, and to share democratic inputs by feed-backing inputs to their drafts of RRJ. Specifically, several salient tenets of findings emerged in such following themes:

a. *Socio-construction of new things in literacy learning: 'literacy as a social event'*

The collaboration and cooperation occurred in classroom dynamics and drove the trainees to be good team work members in encountering reading-writing tasks as well as problem-based learning as raised by the guiding questions given by the instructor. Through group works, the trainees were engaged in constructing together the new 'theories' of worldviews as revealed from the infused massages from the texts being enjoyed in that the trainees connected their responses to their life experiences.

1. *Freedom in speech*

The more rooms were provided for the classroom communities so the trainees had more choices in selecting any strategies to respond to the assigned literary works. To express their feeling of being engaged in the story, for example, one focal trainee acknowledged, "*...terkadang saya terbawa merasa menjadi seseorang dalam cerita tersebut karena saya lebih suka mendalami penokohan dalam cerita tersebut*" (translation: "…sometimes I imagined as if I were the character of the story since I prefer analyzing the characterization of the story"), even he tried to comment the literary works by connecting his feeling, "*…contohnhya persaan sedih ketika saya membaca…*" (translation: "…for example, I felt sad when reading the story..".

2. *Enjoyment and awareness of the importance of journaling project*

The trainees also showed their enjoyment by behaving smartly without being stuck, showing happy expressions in their faces. One focal trainee claimed, "*Kalau menurut saya pribadi, menulis jurnal itu terutama bagi mahasiswa sangat membantu dalam mengekpresikan persaan, pengetahuan, dan terutama kekreatifan dalam nenulis..*"(translation: "In my opinion, wriring literary journal is fruitful for students to express feelings, knowledge, and creativity in writing…"

3. *Relaxation*

Most trainees, as the observation indicated, also showed their very nonthreatening (secure) feelings when getting involved in the journaling project. They, without any burdens, gave critical and personal comments in non-stressful ways.

b. *Democratic sharing*

Very democratic nuance was also created by each member of the classroom. Each member let others speak as they wanted and needed to.

c. *Peer-feedbacking viability*

The member of the classroom had optimal opportunities to give feedbacks to the peer's drafts while projecting their responses. One focal trainee stated, "*Kalau menurut saya, sebuah juranl harus kita share terlebih dahulu kemudian kita bandingkan apa yang kita tulis dengan apa yang mereka ungkapkan. Jadi, akan tahu mana yang lebih baik untuk dipahami*"(translation: "In my opinion, our journal should be shared with others and then be compared to others' so we will know the better one that we then can understand").

d. *Self-empowerment in literacy improvement*

The RRJ-based classroom project entailed the trainees' self-directedness in reading-writing activities. The trainees also deserved chances to empower their own potentials as endowed by their life backgrounds. Another focal trainee claimed, "*…Mungkin menurut saya sendiri, yaitu membiasakan diri menulis…*") (translation: "Probably I think, the important thing is a habbit to write…").

2. Encountering *RQ2*: Emerging varied reader response strategies employed in reading-writing as shown in journals

The study also revealed varied modes of responding to the literature. The covered responses comprised both critical and personal responses. Being critical means the trainees use their logic to interpret the messages of the story and to evaluate the quality of the story. Personal accounts refer to each individual's feelings and mental manifestation. The seven types of reader response comprising engaging, connecting, and judging (indicatively personal), and conceiving, explaining, describing, and interpreting (which are more public) are the bases of its categorization. Yet, among those response strategies, *engaging* is indeed the most personal one. Focal trainees' indicative usage of response can be seen as follows.

Focal Trainee 1

This focal trainee showed his emotional responses as engaging technique to the three different short stories.

To short story 1 (*The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe): The trainee personally expressed his *engagement* feeling when enjoying the story as he said, "I felt engaged in the story". Another expression also emerged, "I love the way the author described situation".

To short story 2 (*The Spirit of Giving* by Maxine Chernoff): He also stated, "I felt that my mind was more opened". And other expressions like: "I began to think that this story was very much challenging."; "I felt engaged in the story and felt horrific"; and "I thought that this story had relationship with my life experience".

To short story 3 (*The Man Who Did not Smile* by Kate Chopin): He also personally expressed, "I felt interested in it"; "I wondered how this story would happen".;"I was impressed with the way of the author"; "I felt the story was unique enough", and "I got more interested in this story".

Focal Trainee 2

The second trainee, female, also expressed her feelings. For example, to short story 1 (*The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe), she claimed by *engaging* the story, "I felt so interesting in that story";

To short story 2 (*The Spirit of Giving* by Maxine Chernoff), she *conceived*, "I began to think of doing the same way with Jane"; and

to short story 3 (*The Man Who Did not Smile* by Kate Chopin), she felt *engaged in*, "This situations reminds me of the similar situation in my life".

Focal Trainee 3

The female trainee also responded to short story 1 (*The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe) by saying, "The prelude is very effective." And "It cleverly drew me into atmosphere of the story". To short story 2 (*The Spirit of Giving* by Maxine Chernoff), she *judged*, "The writer writes the story well enough with a good way". And, to short story 3 (*The Man Who Did not Smile* by Kate Chopin) she *interpreted*, "The story was about the main character who worked the manuscript writer".

Focal Trainee 4

The male trainee felt *engaged* in the short story 1 (*The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe) by *interpreting,*"I began to think that we have different meanings on interpreting the story.", further he also *conceived*, "I began to think that the end of the story is clear."; and *engaged in* the story, "I felt sad as the author."; academically he acknowledged *by judging,* "I get some ideas of his backgrounds".

To short story 2 (*The Spirit of Giving* by Maxine Chernoff), he also *judged*, "I began to think that the story was about giving something to other sincerely."; and *engaged,* "I also felt what the main character feel"; and "I associated the story with other life experience."

To short story 3 (*The Man Who Did not Smile* by Kate Chopin), he engaged in the story: "I am interested in the story"; and *judged,* "I still confused about the purpose of the story."

Focal Trainee 5

The female trainee responded to short story 1 (*The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe) by *judging*, "I got several things from our discussion", and *conceived*, "I also got the moral value"; and further *conceived*, "I assumed that the main character didn't admit …" She responded to short story 2 (*The Spirit of Giving* by Maxine Chernoff) by *judging*, "I thought the story would be interesting". She also engaged in the story, "I really like the writer's idea". To respond to short story 3 (*The Man Who Did not Smile* by Kate Chopin) she *judged,* "I got several things from the story"; though she judged again, "I really don't understand the part of this story". Yet, a good thing from her, she *connected* the story to her life, "I tried to compare the story in my life".

B. Discussion

The study has located the emphasis of the effects of journaling project on the less motivated EFL teacher trainees' English literacy engagement. Reading works as a critical challenge has shaped the trainees' sensitivity in responsively self-directing their autonomous learning from socio-contextual boundedness. Reading-writing events that embrace individual reader's socialization process offer the trainees more chances of getting in touch with social milieu as 'literacy is a social event' (p.3)[64]. Reader response-based teaching pedagogy through the use of RRJ indulges the trainees' high courage and risk-

taking attitude in that they freely articulated their 'voices' to respond to the literary works they had enjoyed most. Parallel to previous studies [25, 16, 20] the trainees grew their personal and critical capacities.

The study also indicated the praxes of empowerment pedagogy. The power of the more competent (the instructor) was made equally distributed to the trainees as classroom members. Each member was let to take parts democratically the project so classroom member empowerment occurred [57]. By engaging in the more autonomous conditions, the trainees got more matured in the way of managing their own learning strategies as well learning styles.

For the sake of tolerating individual characters in expressing reader response strategies represented in RRJ, the response-based teaching pedagogy triggers the trainees to creatively explore more diverse modes of responding technique. Yet, apart from the tendencies of applying critical ones (interpreting the text, judging the quality of the text, conceiving the messages), engaging strategy indicates the most emotionally personal one, which is one of aesthetic reading practices [65, 66, 67].

The use of RRJ has also proved fruitful for the trainees in terms of professional development and pedagogical implications for their future classroom practices. The study promotes the urgent importance of good modeling of making sense of journaling project. The potentials of RRJ can be possibly explored in the context of EFL literature teaching [23, 68, 24].

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

A. Conclusion

The study, departing from the emerging personal and critical accounts of most trainees, witnesses the power of RRJ in pushing trainees to be at the state of shaping and being shaped by socio-constructional-educational contexts and environment. RRJ is believed to offer language educators and EFL pre-and in-service teacher trainees several theoretical and practical benefits for the sake of literacy enrichment. The more response-based teaching pedagogy is emphasized, the more aesthetic stances the reader should take.

B. Recommendation

The qualitative inquiry of the present study is limited to its own size of the sample and generalizability for more diverse settings. Since it is only bounded by very unique case, the further studies are suggested to focus on more considerably selected sites with different academic and social milieus.

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