

Multicultural Readings: Product and Process

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In reading classrooms, reading comprehension skills usually take priority. Teachers constantly provide comprehension exercises which reinforce skills like skimming, scanning, inferencing, predicting and vocabulary recognition. This becomes the overriding concern, so much so that the overall development of learners as readers is totally neglected. According to Muskowitz (1978), this is reflective of a dead classroom where learners are perceived as containers whose primary function is to receive and hold subject matter given by the teacher. Their understanding of the subject matter is then assessed via comprehension questions. Learners are seldom given the chance to explore their responses and feelings towards the readings. There is little scope for creative and reflective thinking.

On the other hand, in a live classroom, learners are “enthusiastically and authentically involved” in the learning activities and they are genuinely “respected and treated as a human being” by the teacher (Muskowitz, 1978). Learners are encouraged to express what they feel after reading given texts. The emphasis is on drawing the content out of the learners. This is the essence of the Reader Response Approach in reading.

The Reader Response Approach

The basic assumption underlying the Reader Response Approach, as argued by Fish (1980) is that texts in and of themselves have no meaning. Learners do not extract meaning from the text or read to decipher the author’s message. Neither are they provided with a single interpretation of the text. In this approach, learners make their own meaning through their creative efforts in interacting with the text. They are able to do so because of their “reservoir of past experiences with the language and the world” (Rosenblatt, 1991). This background knowledge includes not only knowledge of specific concepts and facts, but also beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, aspirations, hopes and fears (Ortony, 1985). Because of the varied background knowledge and personal experience, learners will have different responses to readings.

An important assumption of the reader response approach is the acceptance of a range of possible interpretations of readings and the open sharing of ideas and information. This is in direct contrast to traditional practices where learners look to the teacher for the one and only acceptable interpretation. Learners’ opinions and responses are seldom recognised and valued. Using the reader response approach in reading

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