

**NEW WORDS AND NEW WORLDS:  
EXAMINATION OF LITERATURE-BASED INSTRUCTION  
IN UNIVERSITY EFL CLASSROOMS**

**Jia-ling Charlene Yau**

**ABSTRACT**

This study explored the feasibility of implementing literature-based instruction in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms as well as examined the contents, qualities, and characteristics of student responses to children's literature particularly written for young adult readers. The study followed the stages of action research proposed by McKernan (1996). Data analyses show that children's literature can be part of an alternative EFL curriculum for Taiwanese adult learners, and that literature-based instruction can enhance literacy learning. Book discussion, journal writing, and composing skits and reflective essays are three meaningful paths toward enhancing reading comprehension and interpretation. The overall student responses to the texts are dominantly text-centered; however, the reader-centered responses most often appear in reflective essays. This result highlights the multifaceted role of a reader and the need for a greater awareness of reader response.

Key Words: second language reading, curriculum and instruction, English as a second/foreign language

During the last decade children's literature—high quality trade books written for children from birth to adolescence—has been implemented more and more into English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) curricula in Taiwan (Chen, 2001), as well as in China (Ho, 2000). The main reasons for integrating children's literature into these curricula are twofold: a growing dissatisfaction with the grammar-translation method (Tsao, 2001), i.e., an over-emphasis on drills, analyses of syntactic structure, and bilingual translations, as well as an increasing desire for apt reading materials, which ultimately enhance linguistic and literary competence,

i.e., language awareness and interpretative skills (Carter & McCarthy, 2001). Ho (2000) found that children's literature could serve as part of an alternative EFL curriculum for adult Chinese learners because it provided a threshold for understanding adult literature and a broadened literary canon for language learning. Its language use (e.g., vocabulary, syntactic structure), roughly speaking, is simpler and easier for EFL learners to comprehend than that found in adult literature. Nevertheless, Ho (2000) also pointed out some limitations of the use of children's literature in the education of adult learners of English, one of which was that the protagonists are children and identification for adult learners could be difficult.

While having investigated what extended English texts adult Taiwanese learners of English would read, Yau (2002) found that children's literature made up a sizable portion of reading materials. Of 34 books voluntarily chosen by 58 adult EFL learners, 20 of these were novels either for children or young adults. The adapted version of *The Secret Garden* by Frances H. Burnett (1998) was chosen by the highest number (8) of students, and the simplified version of *A Little Princess* by Frances H. Burnett (1999) was the second most popular novel selected. Also, a majority of the chosen books had been abridged for EFL learners. These findings suggested that adult readers either were interested in reading children's literature or considered it suitable for their current language level. Maxim (2002) contended that with the support of peers and instructors, beginning college-level learners of German did not short-circuit their ability to read an extended text in a foreign language classroom. In this vein, this study sought the feasibility of implementing literature-based instruction, particularly the use of children's literature for young adult readers, into EFL classrooms.

Previous and current studies have shown that literature-based instruction promotes literacy learning (Morrow, 1992; Newell, 1996; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995), and that instruction focusing on reader response tends to enhance comprehension and interpretation (Newell, 1996; Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995). Reader comprehension refers to understanding the information, grasping meaning, inferring causes, and predicting consequences (Bloom, 1956), whereas interpretation involves a reader's effort "to describe in some way the nature of the lived-through evocation of the work" (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 70). Morrow's 1992 study examined the effects of literature-based instruction on literacy learning. Morrow found that the

use of literature as an integral part of a reading program enhanced textual understanding (i.e., story recall and retelling), language expression (i.e., original oral and written stories), and language use (i.e., complexity of vocabulary and sentence structure). Additionally, Newell (1996) investigated how two different instructional tasks in a literature-based program influenced the quality of students' responses to and understanding of texts; one placed an emphasis on reader response, and the other on textual analysis. The students in the reader response group were allowed to include both textual and experiential knowledge in their writing, while the students in the textual analysis group were expected to write a five paragraph essay on character analysis. The researcher found that the former group was much more able to describe, interpret, and generalize information from the texts than the latter group. This finding suggests that instruction focusing on reader response promotes students' writing, reasoning, and literary understanding.

Reader responses are understood to be socially constructed, i.e., meaning is socially negotiated, and mediated through multiple sign systems (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). Wollman-Bonilla and Werchadlo (1995) argued that literature response journals can provide opportunities for students to express their ideas and for the teachers to be aware of pupils' thoughts. The researchers identified two common types of literary responses from the students' journals: text-centered and reader-centered. The text-centered responses, consisting of recounting story events, describing characters' thoughts or feelings, and asking questions about the plot or characters' actions, showed how well the students comprehended the text. On the other hand, reader-centered responses included connecting the text with their personal experiences or prior knowledge, and expressing a desire to be like a certain character in the story or to participate in the events depicted in the text. The responses demonstrated how well the students were developing awareness of textual cues and reading strategies, and how well they responded to the readings with their own interpretations. The findings of this study suggested that journal writing provides a means for readers to demonstrate their understanding of reading passages, as well as a channel for personal reactions and interpretations (Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1995).

Previous and current research has shown that the use of literature that emphasizes reader response enhances literacy learning, particularly among young American readers. Very few studies, however, have

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

investigated this instructional approach in an EFL learning context. Nor has research examined the contents, qualities, and characteristics of EFL readers' responses to literary works from a qualitative perspective. As Grabe and Stoller (2002) advocated, it is imperative for teacher-researchers to carefully examine the role of the affective factors (including perception, attitude, interest, and attribution) on the development of second language reading ability. Thus, this study has two intentions: (1) to explore the EFL adult learners' perceptions of or attitudes toward the implementation of literature-based instruction, and (2) to examine the contents, qualities, and characteristics of their literary responses.

## **METHOD**

### **Theoretical Direction**

Freire's (1995, 1998, 2001) notions of critical literacy, as well as reader response theories (Beach, 1993), served to form the theoretical framework for this study. Rather than viewing literacy as a set of technical skills, Freire (2001) believes that becoming literate requires developing the ability to understand, analyze, and criticize one's own social realities. Literacy learning is meaningful only if "the concepts emerging from the school experience and those resulting from the day-to-day world" can be connected (Freire, 1998, p. 19). For instance, teachers can engage students in discussing and examining the contemporary social and political issues in their own community as well as in other communities. Thus, it is imperative for teachers to "develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunities to use their own reality as a basis of literacy" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 151).

Additionally, current reader response research points out that a reader's responses are "both individual and multifaceted" (Beach & Hynds, 1991, p. 453), and that readers differ from one another in their approaches to texts. Much former and a great deal of current language instruction overemphasize the author's perspective and intention in the process of creating meaning. In contrast, reader response theories acknowledge the influence of one's own experiences and psychological development, as well as the social and cultural contexts in which a reader is situated. In other words, texts, readers, and contexts are inseparable

from one another. Further, they are imbedded within larger contexts (Galda & Beach, 2001). Not only does the reader response approach encourage students to be more actively involved in the creation of meaning (Ash, 1994; Berger, 1996), it also acknowledges and celebrates individual differences in terms of their responses to literature (Thomas, 1996).

In addition, this study employed the “participative worldview” advocated by action researchers (Reason, 1994, p. 324). This perspective is regarded as the heart of inquiry methodologies because of its emphasis on “participation as a core strategy” for inquiry (Reason, 1994, p. 324). This approach echoes the history of reform education, where teachers are considered investigators, facilitators, and reflective thinkers (Dewey, 1910, 1938), thus enabling the researcher to find ways to empower and enlighten the chosen participating students. Additionally, this study followed the stages of action research as proposed by McKernan (1996): identify and analyze problems, formulate ideas, gather and interpret data, act, and evaluate the results of action. The research process, which is spiral in nature, involved planning, action, observation, and reflection. The process of constructing and using participants’ own knowledge can greatly empower participants’ literacy development and cultural understanding.

#### **Research Context**

This study took place during the spring semesters of 2001, 2002, and 2003 in a metropolitan city in Northern Taiwan. The city, with a population of approximately three million residents, is an economic and political center for the nation. Foreign language learning, particularly English, has been necessary for economic growth and social mobility in this region (Crystal, 2003; Tsao, 2001).

#### *Participants*

A total of 171 non-traditional students, 15 males (10%) and 156 females (90%), participated in this study (52 in the 2001 school year, 63 in 2002, and 56 in 2003). Non-traditional students in this study were those who had attained their associate’s degrees, had been working for a few years, and had later returned to a four-year university for advanced studies. Their ages ranged between 24 and 60; however, most were in their late 20s or early 30s. The participating students were from a relatively wide range of prior educational disciplines such as accounting,

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

information processing, secretarial science, electronic engineering, and so forth. Due to the special status of such non-traditional students on campus, their educational needs were often unattended by their teachers and school. Ho (2000) claimed that the use of children's literature promotes literacy learning among Chinese adult learners of English. This article examined the use of children's literature in a course of study serving this specific population.

### **Instructional Intervention**

The literacy instruction in this study consisted of reading selected works of children's literature, participating in book discussions in class, and composing reading journals and reflection essays. The following section discusses the criteria for book selection and the reader response activities implemented in this study.

#### *Material selection*

The criteria for book selection were based on those for evaluating a work of fiction: well-developed characters, well-structured plots, appropriate storylines, and worthy themes (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999). In other words, characters should demonstrate change as a result of significant life events; the plot contains sufficient conflict and suspense to hold the reader's interest; and events, times, and places are appropriate for the storyline (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999). Following these criteria, *Holes* by Louis Sachar (2000), *Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli (1999), and *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (1993) were the choices for this study. These novels, roughly speaking, are written for young adult readers (Grades 5-8). *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000) tells the story of a troubled teen growing up in a family cursed with generations of bad luck and then mistakenly sent to a boys' detention center, where he digs up the truth. *Wringer* (Spinelli, J., 1999) depicts a nine-year-old boy who refuses to become one of the 'wringers' who strangle wounded pigeons during the annual pigeon shoot held as a fundraiser. *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1993) tells the story of a boy who grows up in a 'utopian' community in which there are no choices and citizens are assigned their place in society according to their respective gifts and interests, and how he comes to make his very first choice in life.

The themes of literary works are characteristically universal and continually open for changing interpretations, such as new definitions of families, senses of self, visions of social justice, and so forth. The

universal themes, recurring images, and narrow foci provide readers with the opportunity to become familiar with the characters, their behaviors, and language use. Take *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1993) as an example. One of the recurring themes in this chapter book is choices, which provided an excellent topic for classroom discussion. Two of the questions posed were: (a) Should we be given freedom to choose our soul mate? and (b) What should the role of our government be, or, in other words, what do we expect from our government?

*Reader response activities*

The instructional tenet for this intervention program was that the active construction of meaning promotes literacy learning. Book discussion is deemed one of the means of providing students with meaningful interactions that eventually lead to learning (Tyner, 2004; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). The book discussions, lasting approximately 85 minutes each week, consisted of two phases. In the first phase, students voluntarily formed small groups of four or five in which they discussed the designated prompts. In this phase, the foci of discussions centered on understanding information stated explicitly and implicitly in the text, weaving ideas together, and drawing inferences from the content. Afterwards, the students shared with the entire class what they had found from their previous peer discussions, and then the teacher led the discussion. The second phase of book discussion aimed at reading beyond the lines, by developing the students' senses of story structures, analyzing the motives of characters, and discerning the underlying themes. For example, two of the prompts for the first three chapters of *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000) were: (a) Campers are not allowed to lie in the hammock. Why are those bitten by yellow-spotted lizards allowed to lie in the hammock? (b) What came into your mind after reading these chapters? In other words, what do you think of Camp Green Lake and the story's character, Stanley? Overall, three levels of reading comprehension were anticipated: "understanding the lines," "between the lines," and "beyond the lines" (Alderson, 2000, pp. 7-8).

Moreover, the connection between reading and writing was implemented in this study. The participating students were expected to jot down their ideas or thoughts freely in their reading journals before, during, and after reading. Once the students had finished reading the designated text, they would reorganize and restructure their ideas into one-page reflective essays. Instead of composing reflective essays, the students from the spring semester of 2002 chose to compose, rehearse,

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

and perform skits in class after they finished reading *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1999). As a whole, the instructional aim was twofold: to promote active meaning construction and to enhance English literacy learning. Leki (1993) contended that “[if] we [teachers] use reading and writing reciprocally in L2 classrooms, focusing less on teaching language, reading, or writing and more on allowing students to engage intellectually with text, this engagement with text fosters a view of reading and writing as active construction of meaning” (p. 22).

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

During the process of data collection, I applied the method of data triangulation (Denzin, 1978) by using multiple sources of data across time, space, and persons. The aim was to enhance the establishment of factual accuracy. The major methods of collecting data sources were surveys and instructional intervention. The major data in this study consisted of open-ended questionnaires, document evidence, and field notes. During the school year, I collected in-class writing samples, journals, and essays written by the participating students. At the end of each school year, students were invited to fill out a questionnaire (see the Appendix), which explored the students’ perceptions, attitudes, and stances toward a variety of literacy tasks employed in this study (e.g., book discussions, skit writing, reading journals, personal reflections). For example, the researcher asked, “To what extent have you benefited from our weekly book discussion? Or, to what extent have you not benefited from our weekly book discussion? Please explain your reasons.” The questions were posed in both Chinese and English. The return rates of the surveys given in 2001, 2002, and 2003 were 81%, 82%, and 93% respectively. In addition to the open-ended questionnaires, document evidence, and field notes, six participating students from the 2001 spring semester were interviewed, with each interview lasting about 30 minutes. These students were asked about their previous educational backgrounds, purpose for returning to college, and views of literature-based instruction.

In terms of data analysis, there were two phases. Initially, I developed analytic questions, some of which are closely linked to the intentions of this study. For example, I asked how the participating students viewed the designated novels and literacy tasks they employed. Afterwards, I looked for trends, patterns, salient issues, and concerns within the data. For instance, despite the fact that the surveys indicated a



wide range of perspectives and perceptions with regard to the literacy tasks employed in this study, an overall view was discerned. The second phase applied Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method, which allowed the researcher to develop a grounded theory derived inductively from the study. In terms of their reports on book discussions, response journals, and reflective essays, the student responses were coded and later compiled into detailed files. The student preferences for types of responses emerged from this stage of analysis. The overarching categories that emerged during coding included perceptions of and attitudes toward the extended texts, content and characteristics of literary responses, views of literacy tasks, and so forth. Thematic trends and significant issues began to take shape from the detailed profiles, subsequently forming a basis for presenting the findings.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings of this study suggest that literature written for young adult readers can be implemented into EFL curriculum, partly because an overwhelming majority of the participating students expressed positive views and attitudes toward the texts read, and partly because the literature-based instruction promoted text comprehension and critical reading ability. Among a variety of literacy tasks, book discussions that combine peer and teacher led discussions are deemed beneficial for literacy learning. Careful examinations of the student responses show that the participating students demonstrated reading comprehension across a wide spectrum. On the whole, students in this study paid much more attention to the texts, and their responses tended to be text-centered in nature. Their responses illustrated how well they came to understand the explicit and implicit messages delineated in the texts. Moreover, reader-centered responses were mostly found in the reflective essays in which students critically evaluated their social reality through discussions and reflections.

### **Relatively Positive Attitudes Toward the Literature-Based Program**

The participating students showed relatively positive perceptions of and attitudes toward the intervention program and the instructional approach employed in this study. The 2002 and 2003 participating students reported either modest or good progress in English literacy

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

learning in their year-end questionnaires. Based on a ten-point scale, 95% of the students from the 2002 and 2003 spring semesters indicated either good progress (8 to 10) or moderate progress (5 to 7) in terms of reading improvement, and 80% in 2002 and 88% in 2003 reported improvement in writing. The following excerpt, taken from an interview conducted in the spring of 2001 and later translated from Chinese to English, also supports this claim:

I think this approach is good. The education we had in the past was sheer cram, and it provided us with few opportunities for the development of thinking skills. I think this method will be helpful for whatever we write. When we begin to think of what we write, our essays will not be formulaic, and they will be different from our previous ones.

The study's instructional method, according to the student, promoted second language acquisition (e.g., writing skills) as well as the development of higher cognitive skills (i.e., thinking skills). It is notable that this student showed awareness of Vygotsky's (1962) theory that language acquisition significantly affects cognitive development, which in turn influences language acquisition. Moreover, the participating students described positive learning experiences from the literature-based program, i.e., the chosen texts, the weekly book discussions, the compositions in reading journals, and the reflections.

*Learning through multiple voices of youth*

Children's literature for young adult readers can be appropriate reading materials for adult learners of English. Analyses of the questionnaires given between 2001 and 2003 demonstrated positive responses to the chosen texts. *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000) and *Wrinker* (Spinelli, J., 1999) were chosen for the spring semester 2001. All of the students who responded to the questionnaire (N=42) were in favor of *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000). While 47% of the students indicated that they liked *Wrinker* (Spinelli, J., 1999), 47% reported neutral attitudes. *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1993) was the only reading material for spring 2002; 84% of the participating students (N=51) indicated that they liked the novel. For the year 2003, 90% of the participating students (N=52) indicated that they liked *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000) and 83% liked *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1993). On the whole, *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000) and *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1993) received relatively positive responses from the

participating students. It is important to note that a great majority of the non-traditional students in this study expressed interest or delight in children's literature, regarding it as suitable for English literacy learning. For example, one student from the spring semester of 2003 stated in her reflective essay, "I thought I would never enjoy science fiction, but *The Giver* is really a good one and has provoked readers to think about many profound questions and the meaning of life." Additionally, the following two excerpts derived from the 2003 questionnaire illustrate two participating students' views of and attitudes toward *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000):

- S 1: I like *Holes* very much because the context is very interesting. Everything in the story is connected together. I feel surprised when I catch it [understand the connection]. Also, this novel is really easy to understand and it got [has] [a] very cool ending.
- S2: I think this novel is acceptable to me. It's a little harder [to understand] the meaning behind [embedded in] the story. But I've learned to think about things beyond what I think regularly.

The above excerpts illustrate that reading the novels written for young adult readers can be intriguing and thought provoking. The findings suggest that children's literature may be implemented into EFL curriculum for adult learners because it narrows the gap between what EFL readers are able to read and what they are interested in reading. Hidi (1990) went further, positing that "interest is central to determine how we select and persist in processing certain types of information in the preference to others" (p. 565). That is, interest plays an important role in learning; reading interest can facilitate text comprehension, and interesting materials are memorable.

*Learning through free exchange of ideas*

Of the various literacy tasks employed in this study, book discussions received the most favorable responses from the participating students. An overwhelming majority (95% in 2001, 100% in 2002, and 92% in 2003) of the participating students expressed extremely positive views toward book discussions. This finding supports the major tenet of the Vygotskian approach to learning: social interaction promotes learning that plays out in discourse practices (Vygotsky, 1978; Tyner, 2004). Individuals formulate knowledge by actively constructing that

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

knowledge within specific social contexts or discourse communities (Au, 1993).

Developing broader and deeper insights about literature was the most salient theme emerging from the 2001-2003 surveys. More specifically, the free exchange of ideas promoted reading comprehension. The following statements from the questionnaires provide only a few examples illustrating the participating students' positive attitudes toward book discussions:

- S3: I benefited from the weekly discussion. It helped me to get the idea of each paragraph precisely.
- S4: I can hear different ideas about this book from other classmates. I very much like [the] way we talk about the novel.
- S5: Yes, it makes me know [understand] the meaning of the story more clear [clearly]. Sometimes I didn't catch [the meaning] or feel something, but through discussion, I can get it. I like discussion.

As suggested by Rosenblatt (1983), the free exchange of ideas offered a point of access for the students to scrutinize their own sense of literary works in light of others' opinions. In addition to enhancing reading comprehension, several secondary themes emerged: learning different perspectives from peers and teachers, developing thinking skills, and providing opportunities for language expression. In a sense, the small group discussions can provide EFL students with opportunities for negotiating and constructing meaning with peers. In another sense, teacher-led discussions aimed at meaning construction with more competent individuals who helped the learners solve problems by creating a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The findings of this study suggest that book discussions can create a rewarding path for literacy learning, especially in classes with a wide range of English literacy skills and experiences.

*Learning through egocentric expression*

Again, positive responses to reading journals (i.e., free writings) emerged in 2002 and 2003 (this question was not in the 2001 questionnaire). Forty-three students (83%; N=52) in 2002 and thirty-two students (63%; N=50) in 2003 felt they benefited from this literacy task in terms of reading comprehension and writing skills. For instance, one

participating student wrote the following on the questionnaire:

When writing [a] journal, it helps us to note [notice] the important part of a certain chapter or section. Because when we finish the book, some important clues might forget [be forgotten] by the time we finish the book. It's very helpful for writing reflection because all the important points were selected in [from] the journal.

This type of literacy task was regarded as a means for recalling, synthesizing, and organizing ideas; that is, journal responses enhanced reading comprehension and language expression. The salient features of the student responses will be discussed in the subsequent section. It is also notable that a few negative responses appeared in the questionnaires. Some students considered this literacy task redundant because it repeated other literacy activities in class. The following excerpts illustrate the negative attitudes expressed by three participating students:

- S 1: I think the reflection for the whole book is enough. Writing a journal decreases the pleasure of reading because it makes reading to become a [an] assignment only.
- S2: It doesn't help much, because we don't have much time to do it every week. We usually fall behind the schedule.
- S3: Basically, I don't think it will help me. I think go[ing] to class and discuss[ing] with classmates is more important.

There are two possible explanations for the negative views expressed by these students. First, it is likely that this activity could have been burdensome for some of the students who worked during the day. Although most of the participating students reported they accomplished weekly reading assignments either "always" or "most of the time," a few (30% in 2001; 23% in 2002; and 14% in 2003) might have found it difficult to meet the weekly demands. A great majority of the students in this study worked during the day, and some were married and had family members to care for after work. In addition, the students might not have been accustomed to this type of literacy activity since the grammar-translation method remains dominant in EFL classrooms in Taiwan (Tsao, 2001). Free writing is not a common literacy task, and thus free expression is not encouraged in Taiwanese schools.

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

Unlike the diverse views on journal writing, students expressed favorable views of composing personal reflections and skits. Three-fourths of the students in 2002 expressed interest in skit writing, and slightly over 90% of the students in 2003 were positive about writing reflective essays. Skit composition was viewed as a creative and delightful literacy activity. Creativity, engagement, and cooperative learning were three salient themes observed in the student responses. "It's fun, and I like group work," and "[we] can organize our thinking and be more creative" were two comments the 2002 students conveyed about composing skits. Moreover, according to the participating students of 2003, composing personal reflections after reading the designated novel enhanced reading comprehension (e.g., grasping main ideas, reviewing, recalling) and writing ability (e.g., organizing, provoking thoughts, summarizing, using language, expressing views, developing thinking skills). These findings suggest that readers gained broader and deeper insights by reflecting on literary works. As a whole, the literature-based program that used authentic children's literature, book discussions, and the composition of reading journals, skits, and personal reflections proved to be beneficial for EFL learning. The subsequent section will discuss the content, quality, and characteristics of student responses to literature.

#### **Dominantly Text-Centered with some Reader-Centered Responses**

Data analyses of book discussions and the students' various writings (e.g., reading journals and reflections) pointed out that the student responses were both text-centered and reader-centered in nature. The responses derived from book discussions were mostly text-centered, while those from reading journals and reflective essays were either text-centered or both text-centered and reader-centered. The content, quality, and characteristics of the responses were also indicative of the participating students' levels of language competence and literary competence. The following section discusses the marked trends of the student responses found in this study.

##### *Reading the word*

Data analyses indicated that the participating students paid a great deal of attention to understanding what the authors intended to convey in the texts. They recounted textual events and understood the characters' thoughts, feelings, or actions. These readers tended to focus much more

on grasping the literal and underlying meanings embedded in the texts. The following response serves as one of many examples of how well the students grasped the meanings in the text through book discussions. The prompt given for discussion was: “In this chapter, Stanley wondered if he truly had carried Zero up to the mountaintop. Is it possible for Stanley to have carried Zero for such a long, hard climb?” One group responded:

Yes, it is possible. According to the previous chapters, Stanley’s great-grandfather thought he couldn’t [have] carried Madam Zeroni to the top of the mountain, but after he carried the piglet a few months, he got stronger to make him do it well. For Stanley, he dug holes in the camp every day, which makes [made] Stanley stronger. Therefore, with the evidence from the past to present, we believe that Stanley is possible [it is possible for Stanley] to carry Zero to the top of the mountain.

The response shows how well this particular group understood the interrelationship of two story events depicted in the text. One is that Stanley’s great-grandfather became stronger by carrying the piglet up to the mountaintop, and the other is that Stanley became stronger by digging holes in the camp. This group demonstrated their ability to draw from the intertextual evidence to support their claim. Their reasoning was sound and logical.

Moreover, another group also showed sound reasoning: Stanley became stronger, and he had no other alternative. The group’s response is as follows:

Yes, we think it’s possible. There are two reasons. One is that Stanley had been trained in Camp Green Lake. He has [had] been digging holes all the time. So he was strong. Second, they were in the [a] difficult situation, no water, [no] food, and Zero was sick. So he must [had to] climb to the top of the mountain with all his best [might and main].

Like the previous group, this group provided a similar reason: the protagonist became stronger by digging holes, which enabled him to carry his friend to the mountaintop. While the former group reasoned in a mystical manner (concerned with fulfilling an ancestral promise), this group reasoned in a relatively pragmatic manner (concerned with life’s

physical realities). Here, the readers tried to infer the intentions of the story's characters as well as to make connections among the story's events. The text-centered responses demonstrated the students' understanding of this particular episode. Through sharing and provoking thoughts during discussions, they enhanced their reading comprehension and interpretation. In addition to the responses elicited from in-class book discussions, the student reading journals provided further evidence. The following excerpt about this particular episode in *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000) comes from one student's reading journals:

The sleep and onions had done Zero a lot of good as well. Zero was getting stronger. Stanley decided to head down the mountain alone to get the shovel back. I think it would have been impossible [for Stanley] to carry Zero up the hill from there, especially after walking all day with no food or water. The shovel must be [have been] buried in some weeds. Finally[,] Stanley found the shovel. On his way back up the mountain, Stanley had to sit down and rest several times. It was a long, hard climb for weak Stanley. In this chapter, I know Stanley has [had] strong willpower. He is [was] also a wise boy. He always used his brain to solve problems that he met [encountered].

This student speculated about the story event (whether the character truly carried his friend up to the mountaintop), and then inferred Stanley's characteristics (strong will, wisdom, thoughtfulness) from the story event. Nevertheless, the student's statements were somehow vague and unclear with regard to the action conducted by the story character.

Furthermore, from this episode students perceived friendship as a central theme for *Holes* (Sachar, L., 2000) in their responses. The following excerpt is taken from one paragraph of a reflective essay written by one of the participating students from 2001:

We cannot live without friendship. If Stanley had not gone to find Zero and help him, Zero would have died. Stanley gave Zero a hand promptly when Zero needed it. In that difficult moment, Stanley did not think of his own life in danger but tried his best to help his friend. He even did not blame his friend for causing him to be in this camp. Because of his persistence and faithfulness, Stanley and Zero became closer, and they upheld each other and finally overcame all predicaments they encountered. I am touched by their friendship.



Like many others, this participating student inferred friendship as one of the themes, supported it with textual evidence (e.g., “If Stanley had not gone to find Zero and help him, Zero would have died”), and at last expressed a personal reaction (“I am touched by their friendship”). The student response was text-centered because it inferred the actions and intentions of the characters, as well as expressing understanding of their feelings and thoughts.

*Reading beyond the words*

In a sense, the composition of reflective essays provided the means for personal reflections, evaluations, and applications. In another sense, this type of literacy task offered an opportunity for critical thinking and language expression. Contrary to the relatively text-centered responses displayed in book discussions and reading journals, predominantly reader-centered responses appeared in reflective essays. The participating students in this study demonstrated their skills of synthesis, analysis, critique, and application; that is, they showed both language competence and literary competence. This section discusses how well two students, Irene and Jolin (pseudonyms), read and interpreted the literary works, *Wringer* (Spinell, J., 1999) and *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1993) respectively.

In the following excerpts, Irene’s reflective essay manifested what Freire (1998) called “reading of a previous reading of the world” (p. 19) as she responded to *Wringer* (Spinell, J., 1999). Irene began to recognize her right to a voice in her society as she learned to organize and consolidate her accumulated experiences in relation to literature. She developed an ability to critically evaluate her social reality by reflecting on what she had read:

In *Wringer*, I see a nine-year-old boy, Palmer, who at first felt uncertain and confused with the annual festival in his community—shooting and killing pigeons for fund raising. But in the end Palmer courageously stood for his belief in public. It would be easy for me to say that if Palmer does not want to be a wringer, he does not need to [be]. When I thought of a similar situation in our society, I asked myself this question: Would I have the same courage as Palmer does? Am I able to stand [up] for my beliefs and against unreasonable social conventions?

Irene started her first paragraph with the statements that demonstrated

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

her understanding of the major story conflict (Palmer felt uncertain and confused by the annual festival in his community) and its solution (Palmer courageously stood up for his belief in public). Subsequently, this reader put herself in the position of the protagonist and presented her stances and beliefs. In the following paragraphs, Irene scrutinized two well-accepted customs with respect to a woman's role in society by probing into the legitimacy of the social practices. The following excerpt illustrates the student's notion and stance in regard to the role of a married daughter in Taiwanese society:

About two weeks ago, one of my colleagues told me that a married daughter in a conservative Taiwanese family is not supposed to come back to her biological parents' home. She cannot even return to pay respect to her deceased parents. A married daughter is regarded as water being thrown [poured] out; therefore, she is not supposed to maintain a close relationship with her biological parents. I think this kind of thinking is ridiculous, and I will definitely welcome my daughter to come home whenever she likes.

This student organized and consolidated her lived experiences and then courageously voiced not only her disapproval but also her solution to this particular social problem existing in her surroundings: the altered social status of a married daughter in a somewhat patriarchal society. Her multiple and competing identities, derived from her lived experiences as a bilingual individual, parent, worker, and student, were reflected in her literary response.

In her concluding paragraph, Irene acknowledged her strengths and subsequently provided a practical solution that she saw as inspired by the protagonist. She stated, "I think that it depends on both families to make changes, but one alone cannot change it. Therefore, the best I can do is to communicate with my husband and his family members. I hope I can have their understanding and support, just like Palmer has from his parents and best friends." Similarly, the student would seek support from her family and friends in order to stand up for what she firmly believed: that a married daughter remains a vital member of her biological family. In a strict sense, Irene was engaged in reading and played an active role in making sense of what she had read. She likewise made connections between what was on the page and what was derived from her life experiences. This student not only read the words of the message the author intended

to convey, but also read the worlds in which she lived. The student's statements showed her abilities to critically evaluate her social reality, as well as to boldly acknowledge her right to a voice in society.

In a sense, Jolin, like Irene, expressed ideas and opinions with confidence, and her statements embodied the language and ideas of both. In another sense, this student demonstrated her ability to evaluate the hidden assumptions, inductive inferences, and strength of arguments from the texts. That is, the student exhibited an ability known as critical reading (Alderson, 2002). Her responses to *The Giver* (Lowry, L., 1993) are an example. Jolin composed a five paragraph reflective essay comparing and contrasting the society in which she lived and that which the author imagined. In her introductory paragraph, she expressed the following:

*The Giver* by Lois is very inspiring science fiction that involves a lot of social issues. The author seems to have created [a] utopian society in the story, but it also depends on the readers' values to judge whether it's a utopia or [a] dystopia. After reading it, I examined our community and Jonas's, and I found that ours have something more valuable than Jonas's such as human rights, feeling[s] of love, and memory [memories].

These statements exhibited how well the reader understood this particular genre (science fiction), discerned the underlying assumptions depicted in the text (social issues; a utopian or a dystopian society), responded to it with her own personal interpretation ("I found that ours have something more valuable than Jonas's"), and at last supported her claims with concrete evidence ("such as human rights, feeling[s] of love, and memory [memories]"). In the subsequent paragraphs, this reader elaborated on the advantages of her society in which human rights, feelings of love, and memories of the past were appreciated. For example, while discussing the notion of human rights, this reader stated:

People have no human rights in Jonas's community. It would be nice to live in a world without poverty, crime, sickness, and etc. But I wonder if it would still be a perfect world without privacy and freedom of speech and making choices. What makes our community worth [worthwhile] to live in? That is freedom, one of the most precious things we own. On the contrary [However], we should examine if our society provides too much freedom [so] that people

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

forget the importance of law and order. I think each of us should be grateful and stop doing things harmful to the system.

The above statements indicate the critical reading ability of this particular reader, who evaluated the assumptions and arguments implicitly presented in the text (“it would be nice to live in a community without poverty, crime, and sickness,” and yet it wouldn’t be nice to live in a community without privacy, freedom of speech, and the right to make one’s own choices). In addition to the critical evaluation of the text, this particular writer boldly called for action: to have a positive attitude toward our society and to protect its existing law and order.

Overall, the reading responses of these two students provide excellent examples of a transactional process of reading. That is, a reader shapes the text by activating one’s prior knowledge or experience to select certain images and feelings, while at the same time a text shapes the reader by recreating new experiences and new orientation (Morrow & Gambrell, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994). These findings likewise supported Freire’s (1998) notion that literacy learning can be meaningful only if its purpose is for comprehending and realizing the reading of the word and that of the world, the reading of text and of context.

#### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION**

On the whole, this study offers insights into alternative ways of thinking about EFL reading curriculum and instruction in Taiwanese contexts. As Tse (2000) postulated, it is imperative for foreign language teachers to understand their college students’ perceptions of classroom interactions, levels of success, and attributions of success and failure, all of which, in turn, have important pedagogical and programmatic implications in teaching and learning. The findings of this study suggest that literature-based programs promote literacy learning, and that children’s literature for young adult readers can be appropriate reading materials for EFL adult learners. High quality children’s literature can provide EFL adult readers with a means for exploring self, society, the past, and the present world. Book discussion, journal writing, and composing reflective essays can be three meaningful paths toward the enhancement of reading comprehension and interpretation. In this study, book discussion created an opportunity for teachers and students to have satisfying and meaningful interactions with each other about their

reading of literature. Writing in journals and composing reflective essays not only promoted language expression but also developed thinking skills through contemplation and reflection. These findings suggest that the transactional view of reading—that interactive events are at the heart of learning—can be advocated in EFL classrooms as well.

Furthermore, text-centered and reader-centered responses were both found in the various types of literacy tasks employed in this study. The student responses were dominantly text-centered, while the reader-centered responses were mostly found in reflective essays. In a sense, text-centered responses revealed the relationship between the consciousness of the readers and the perceived texts. In this study the EFL students tended to regard the texts as artistic objects, showing willingness to adopt the writers' ways of perceiving reality. I suggest that instruction focusing on the studies of language and form of literary works can be an effective approach, particularly for those Asian students who believe that the power of good writing promotes vigorous thinking. With a strong emphasis on texts, not only can teachers stimulate students' fascination with literature, but they also can encourage their students' convictions that good writing is important and pleasurable, and mastering rhetoric is worth the effort (Erbaugh, 1990).

In addition to producing text-centered responses, students such as Irene and Jolin showed their ability to construct their personal interpretations of or reactions to the texts read. Learning about various ways of life enabled the students to develop reflective thinking skills, which are considered a crucial element in gaining a clear perspective and a sense of direction in actual life (Rosenblatt, 1983). On the one hand, the findings indicate the multifaceted role of a reader and the need for a greater awareness of reader response. Further studies are necessary in order to scrutinize issues such as whether there are gender implications for reading engagement, motivation, and responses, and what positions adult readers of English assume in their responses to protagonists whose gender is the same as theirs or different from theirs. On the other hand, the finding points out a possible relationship between reading characteristics and preference for literary responses. A limited number of books were adopted in this study for the purposes of intensive as well as strategic reading; however, extensive reading of children's literature is highly encouraged as well. In other words, a broadened literary canon should be considered when implementing literature-based instruction in EFL classrooms.

## REFERENCES

- Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge.
- Ash, B. (1994). Narratives of experience: Response-centered teaching and teacher reflection. *Journal of Reading*, 38, 180-187.
- Au, K. H. (1993). *Literacy instruction in multicultural settings*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Beach, R. (1993). *A teacher's introduction to reader-response theories*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Beach, R., & Hynds, S. (1991). Research on response to literature. In R. Baff, M. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Peterson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 453-491). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Berger, L. (1996). Reader response journals: You make the meaning . . . and how. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 39, 380-385.
- Bloom, B. S. (Ed.) (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives*. Ann Arbor, MI: David McKay.
- Carter, R., & McCarthy, M. (2001). Discourse and creativity: Bridging the gap between language and literature. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principle & practice in applied linguistics* (pp. 303-322). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chen, Y. (2001, May). *Children's literature and ESL university writing*. Paper presented at the meeting of the 2001 International Conference on the Application of English Teaching, Taipei, Taiwan.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge.
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Boston: D. C. Heath.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Logic: The theory of inquiry*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Erbaugh, M. S. (1990). Taking advantage of China's literary tradition in teaching Chinese students. *The Modern Language Journal*, 74, 15-25.
- Freire, P. (1995). Reading the world and the word: An interview with Paulo Freire. *Language Arts*, 62, 15-21.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Freire, P. (2001). The adult literacy process as cultural action for freedom. In S. Beck & L. Oláh (Eds.), *Perspectives on language and literacy* (pp. 335-352). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word & the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Galda, L., & Beach, R. (2001). Response to literature as a cultural activity. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 64-75.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. Essex, UK: Pearson.
- Hidi, S. (1990). Interest and its contribution as a mental resource for learning. *Review of Education Research*, 60, 549-571.
- Ho, L. (2000). Children's literature in adult education. *Children's Literature in Education*, 31, 259-271.
- Leki, I. (1993). Reciprocal themes in ESL reading and writing. In J. G. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the composition classroom: Second language perspectives* (pp. 9-32). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Lynch-Brown, C., & Tomlinson, C. (1999). *Essentials of children's literature* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Maxim, H. H. (2002). A study into the feasibility and effects of reading extended authentic discourse in the beginning German language classroom. *Modern Language Journal*, 86, 20-35.
- McKernan, J. (1996). *Curriculum action research: A handbook of methods and resources for the reflective practitioner*. London: Kogan Page.
- Morrow, L. M. (1992). The impact of a literature-based program on literacy achievement, use of literature, and attitudes of children from minority backgrounds. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 27, 251-275.
- Morrow, L. M., & Gambrell, L. B. (2000). Literature-based reading instruction. In M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, P. D. Pearson, & R. Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 3, pp. 563-608). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Newell, G. E. (1996). Reader-based and teacher-centered instructional tasks: writing and learning about a short story in middle-track classrooms. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 28, 147-172.
- Reason, P. (1994). Three approaches to participative inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 324-339). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1983). *Literature as exploration* (4th ed.). New York: Modern Language Association.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1994). *The reader, the text, and the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Thomas, P. L. (1996). When Wordsworth is too tame: Merging minority literature with the classics in the secondary language arts curriculum. In L. Cook & H. C. Lodge (Eds.), *Voices in English Classroom* (pp. 177-185). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Tsao, F. (2001). Teaching English from elementary school in an Asian context: A language planning perspective. *The Language Teacher*, 25(6), 17-19.
- Tse, L. (2000). Student perceptions of foreign language study: A qualitative analysis of foreign language autobiographies. *Modern Language Journal*, 84, 69-84.
- Tyner, B. (2004). *Small group reading instruction: A differentiated model for beginning and struggling readers*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau*

Wollman-Bonilla, J., & Werchadlo, B. (1995) Literature response journals in a first-grade classroom. *Language Arts*, 72, 562-570.

Yau, J. (2002, April). *Reading the words and worlds*. Poster session presented at the annual meeting of International Reading, San Francisco, CA.

**Children's Books Cited**

Burnett, Frances H. (1998). *Penguin Readers: The secret garden*. London: Penguin Longman.

Burnett, Frances H. (1999). *Easy Readers: A little princess*. Taipei, Taiwan: Cave Bookstore.

Lowry, Lois (1993). *The Giver*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers.

Sachar, Louis (2000). *Holes*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers.

Spinelli, Jerry (1999). *Wringer*. New York: HarperCollins.

***CORRESPONDENCE***

*Jia-ling Charlene Yau, Department of English Language, Literature, and Linguistics,  
Providence University, Taichung, Taiwan*

*E-mail address: [jlyau@pu.edu.tw](mailto:jlyau@pu.edu.tw)*



**APPENDIX: A SURVEY**

1. Were you able to keep up with our weekly readings?  
Always    Most of time    Sometimes    Occasionally    Never
2. What are the major reasons why you were unable to keep up with the readings?
3. How do you like *The Giver*?  
10                      7                      5                      1  
Very much            Like                      So So.                Dislike
4. Why do you like this novel? Or why do you dislike the novel? Please explain your reasons.
5. To what extent have you benefited from our weekly book discussions? Or to what extent have you not benefited from our weekly book discussion? Please explain your reasons.
6. In what way did the reading journal promote your English literacy learning? Or in what way did the reading journal distract your literacy learning? Please explain your reasons.
7. In what ways did the weekly reflection help your literacy learning? Or in what ways did the weekly reflection hinder your literacy learning? Please explain your reasons.
8. In what ways have you benefited from working on a skit? Or in what ways have you not benefited from working on a skit? Please tell me what you have learned or what you hoped to learn but have not learned in this class.
9. Self-evaluation. Please assess your own reading and writing progress according to the following scale.  
8-10 : I have learned a lot and made good progress.  
5-7 : I have learned some and made moderate progress.  
3-4 : I have not learned much in this class and made slow progress.  
0-2 : I have learned very little from this class and made little progress.

Improved Reading

10    9    8    7    6    5    4    3    2    1    0

Writing Learned

10    9    8    7    6    5    4    3    2    1    0