Coordinating Aesthetic Stance and Efferent Reading in Poetry Teaching

英詩教學中整合"美學欣賞的觀點"與"求知式的閱讀"

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the pendulum of poetry teaching has swung between two extremes: the conventional critical-interpretation approach and the untraditional response-based method. The critical-interpretation approach overemphasizes the importance of transmitting the knowledge of poetic conventions to students in order to develop their capability of comprehending and evaluating literary merits. On the other hand, the response-based method highly underscores the aesthetic stance students take in appreciating poetry to generate a unique, personal, and affective experience with literature. In this study I propose coordinating aesthetic stance with efferent reading in teaching poetry. A sample demonstration of teaching Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is provided to illustrate the suggested dualistic model of poetry instruction. The model suggests that in order for teachers to develop a genuine passion for reading poetry in students, it may be not productive to engage students in the formal analysis of poems before the poems have been personalized. Only after students have experienced aesthetic participation with literature can they cultivate a life-long interest in poetry.

Keywords: aesthetic stance, efferent reading, poetry teaching, literature instruction

A national survey conducted in the U.S. reported that students' recreational and academic reading attitudes gradually became more negative throughout the elementary school years (McKenna, Kear, Ellsworth, 1995). Studies have also indicated that students' enthusiasm for poetry declined as they became older (e.g., Terry, 1974). Galda (1993) argued that it is "the teaching practices, rather than the genre itself that creates such a distaste in readers" (p.106). Galda provided some reasons why the poetry students learned in school was neither playful nor pleasant. First, the poems they encounter are "basalized," inauthentic works. Second, they associate poetry with the torturous process of memorizing a poem for class testing or recitation. Third, they are instructed to find the meanings to poems for which they may search in vain. Students are often frustrated due to their own perceived inability to solve the problem of uncovering a complex poem's hidden meanings. Fawcett's (1995) observation also confirmed such findings. When students connect poetry with a problem-solving puzzle or a painstaking examination, it is little wonder that students lose interest in poetry.

In this article, I review the traditional efferent-reading approach to poetry teaching which more often than not results in students' reluctance towards poetry reading. I then argue for the benefits of coordinating efferent reading and aesthetic stance in poetry instruction by (a) exploring Rosenblatt's (1997) concept of aesthetic stance, (b) addressing the importance of the reader's affective responses to poems, and (c) providing an overview of response-based instruction in poetry. Finally, based on research evidence discussed above, I offer an eclectic approach to poetry instruction in college.

The Deficiency of Efferent Reading in Poetry Teaching

One of main causes for students' dislike of poetry is that school teachers commonly put the entire focus of instruction on the formal analysis of poems. Such a narrow, short-sighted teaching perspective leads to the phenomenon that teachers often ignore their students' personal responses to poetry (McClure, Harrison, & Reed, 1989). McClure, Harrison, and Reed pointed out that the use of critical interpretation approach robs poetry of its vitality and relevancy. This is because the traditional literary theory

(e.g., New Criticism) has focused on the text or the author instead of the reader.[1] As a result, teachers are concerned mainly about whether students can "discover the 'correct' meaning of text," and "recognize significant poetic elements, forms, and common poetic devices" (McClure, Harrison, & Reed, p. 174). To reach this teaching goal, teachers extensively drill on these aspects of poetry. Students are discouraged from bringing any personal perspectives to interpret poems. They are even admonished not to commit the "intentional fallacy" in interpreting poems. This critical interpretation approach is now widely recognized as the major factor which causes students to consider the study of poetry unpleasant. Scholes (2001) believed that the New Critical method was "bad for poets and poetry and really terrible for students and teachers of poetry" (cited in Showalter, 2003, p. 63). On the whole, the teaching approach utilizing traditional literary theory in poetry class is unlikely to produce "creative and highly imaginative responses, characterized by strong emotional feelings" (McClure, Harrison, and Reed, p.175).

Recently scholars and educators have become aware that "poetry is not a vehicle for objective dissection or analysis" (McClure, Harrison, and Reed, 1989, p. 178). Poetry should be "conceived as a source of enjoyment and an artistic venture" (ibid.). A selection of poetry should be thought of as a living object, waiting to be experienced by the reader. The major spokesman of such a viewpoint is Louise Rosenblatt. Rosenblatt (1980) defined a poem as "a happening, an event, in which the listener or reader draws on images and feelings and ideas stirred up by the words of the text; out of these is shaped the lived-through experience" (p. 386). In other words, students are entitled to take a reader-response perspective toward the text. Students' affectionate engagement in poetry reading is more valuable than their detached literary analyses. The reader should generate "the lived-through" experience with the text, instead of searching for the obscure, elusive, and often ambiguous meanings within the text.

Promoting Aesthetic Responses to Poetry

Rosenblatt (1980) criticized traditional literature teaching in that efferent reading

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[1] Brooks and Warren's (1938) *Understanding Poetry* is representative of New Criticism, a method of practical criticism on poems' textual properties. It was once widely adopted as a textbook in colleges.

was overemphasized in instructional practices to the extent of neglecting the aesthetic stance.[2] Rosenblatt pointed out that "the learning environment and teaching approaches have tended to inculcate a predominantly efferent stance toward all texts" (p. 389). Consequently, instead of preserving students' spontaneous, affective sensibility to the literary text, literature instruction has been oriented "to satisfy the efferent purposes of categorizing the genre, paraphrasing the 'objective' meaning or analyzing the techniques represented by the text" (Rosenblatt, p. 392). To remedy this instructional deficiency, Rosenblatt argued that aesthetic reading ability should be nurtured from the beginning and throughout the entire curriculum. A teaching program should include the component of reader response to develop students' capability of aesthetic reading.

One issue central to this controversy between the critical interpretation approach and the aesthetic response method is how and when to teach literary conventions. In the critical interpretation approach, the formal analysis of literary text is of primary importance; conversely, according to reader-response theory, the aesthetic experience with literature is the priority. Rosenblatt (1980) claimed that frequent affective engagement with poetic texts "should precede the theoretical analysis of such conventions" and thus knowledge of literary conventions "will be absorbed in the actual reading" (p. 393). Ideally, students come to understand literary conventions through implicit assimilation rather than explicit instruction.

Indeed Rosenblatt (1978) advocated that reader-response reading should proceed beyond the whimsical emotional responses to disciplined critical analyses. Rosenblatt actually acknowledged that efferent analyses did contribute to strengthen aesthetic engagement with text, stating the following:

> In the basic paradigm for literary criticism, then, the movement is from an intensely realized aesthetic transaction with the text to reflection on semantic or technical or other details in order to return to, and correlate them with, that particular personally apprehended aesthetic reading.

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[2]   Efferent reading refers to reading for facts and information. Rosenblatt (1980) differentiated efferent and aesthetic reading: "Efferent reading will select out the desired referents and ignore or subordinate affect. Aesthetic reading, in contrast, will fuse the cognitive and affective elements of consciousness—sensations, images, feelings, ideas—into a personally lived-through poem or story" (p. 388).

(p. 162)

In light of Rosenblatt's (1980) instructional suggestion, teachers should encourage students' spontaneous comments on the literary text and use them as the springboard for further inquiry. The importance of affective response is due to the fact that "once there has been indeed a lived-through evocation from the text, students can be led toward increasingly self-critical and sound interpretation" (Rosenblatt, p. 395). With this basis in mind, the trajectory of teaching poetry starts from an aesthetic stance, proceeds through reader-text transaction, and ends with critical analyses. To sum up, the aesthetic experience is essential to poetry reading. The initial lived-through experience can be powerful enough to motivate and sustain students' interest in poetry. Through aesthetic reading, students may become passionate about the written word and make themselves life-long readers of poetry. In addition, aesthetic experience serves as the entry point to the text and further leads readers to reflection and analysis. After this has been done, then students can begin to acquire knowledge of literary conventions with less difficulty.

Overview of Response-Based Teaching Methods

In response to Rosenblatt's call for combining efferent reading and aesthetic engagement, McClure, Harrison, and Reed (1989) proposed an alternative approach to poetry instruction. This alternative method, "freedoms within form," encouraged students to "write and respond freely to poetry yet respect its conventions and forms" (p. 186). Without much teacher instruction, but deeply immersed in hearing, reading, and writing poetry, students slowly but surely internalize literary elements. It has been proven that their critical insights and literary understandings deepen with this method.

Fawcett (1995) reported an instructional experiment with teaching poems to students in cooperation with one classroom teacher. Fawcett postulated that poetry can not be *taught*, nor should poetry be taught as a subject separated from students' experiences. The instructional approach she practiced in the classroom reflected her beliefs about poetry. In order to attract students, she merely began reading poetry to them every time she visited the classroom once a week. In between she asked the classroom teacher to read to the students as many poems as possible. The poems

Fawcett herself read in class were those that would interest her students. The poems concerned girlfriends, boyfriends, parent-child problems, and physical appearance. Humorous poems by Shel Silverstein were also included.

Fawcett began teaching the elements of poetry such as rhyme, rhythm, imagery, and figurative language only after a genuine interest in the poems germinated. Fawcett then read some of her own poems to the students; this in turn inspired students to create their own poems. By means of personalizing poetry-reading, Fawcett successfully turned the lessons into enjoyable experiences rather than just a lesson in abstract theory and criticism which the students had come to expect in literature class. Fawcett's immersion approach corresponds to Rosenblatt's (1978) aesthetic reading. Fawcett provided students with various opportunities of connecting poems to their lives, and thus they gained the *lived-through* experiences of reading poems. Specifically, the students had affectionate evocation through these fine poems, then began reflective thinking about what they read, and finally critically evaluated these works. By means of fostering aesthetic responses to poems, the students eventually developed enthusiasm for reading and may ultimately become passionate readers.

The Stricklands (1997) engaged students in playing with poetry through three kinds of activities: immersion, exploration, and experimentation. At the immersion stage of the instruction, the Stricklands read aloud a great number of poems to students and occasionally invited them to clap along or take part in choral reading of a particular poem. Between poems the Stricklands asked students questions such as what they feel about these poems and what thought they want to share with others. In the second activity, students were guided, by way of their responses, to explore the constitution of poetry. In the last phase of the teaching activity, students were instructed to experiment with writing poetry. The students were encouraged to express their feelings and thoughts in poetic language. The Stricklands reported that the students benefited significantly from these learning activities.

From the perspective of aesthetic reading, Cai and Traw (1997) contended that literary instruction should combine reader response and critical analysis, both of which are "mutually complementary" to "ensure the most rewarding experience of literature" (p. 28). The rationale behind the transition from the personal, seminal responses to sophisticated critical analyses is based on the fact that when responding to poetry with

favor or dislike, students begin to make a basic interpretation. Then they need to take further steps to explain how the poems they read evoke personal positive or negative experiences and elaborate on what poetic setting, images, or characters spark particular emotions. In this way, students' focus on evocation progressively shifts to reflective and critical thinking about what they read. Both affective engagement and critical analysis are indispensable parts of literary appreciation.

Cai and Traw (1997) described readers' initial, unsophisticated responses as entry points into a poem. They also pointed out one tough problem that students may stop at the entry level of evocation "without making any further effort at interpretation" (p. 22). To circumvent this problem, Cai and Traw advocated helping students develop literary literacy. They defined literary literacy as "the ability to understand, interpret, and critique literature" (p. 21). The purpose of developing students' literary literacy is to "help students achieve a more active, competent literary transaction with literature" and assist them in "arriving at a fuller, richer reading that does justice to its artistic complexity" (p. 24).

To acquire literary literacy, students need to study literary conventions, that is, the elements constituting poetry, drama, and novel. This claim is based on the assumption that "knowledge of literary conventions is the foundation of literary interpretation and criticism" (Cai & Traw, 1997, p. 25). If students understand literary conventions and possess a repertoire of interpretive strategies, they can respond to literature critically and achieve a better understanding of literary subtleties. The point to be emphasized here is that the acquisition of literary conventions is best accomplished through students' affective engagement in appreciating poetry. The literary conventions should not be taught as discrete knowledge separated from poetry reading. In short, what Cai and Traw proposed for poetry instruction is a holistic approach to the development of students' literary literacy meaning the ability to generate personal responses to and conduct critical analyses on literature. Cai and Traw regarded such a holistic approach as "the only way to turn our students into enthusiastic, understanding, and appreciative readers of literature" (p. 31).

Eva-Wood (2008) reported a case study applying a feel-and-think-aloud method to teach poetry at the eleventh grade level class. Eva-Wood's teaching theory was framed on the presumption that students' active engagement in the process of voicing feelings

and thoughts about poems can deepen and enrich their literary analyses. From classroom discussions, Eva-Wood identified four major reading strategies her students used in response to poems. These "affectively based comprehension strategies" included "responding to key words and phrases," "visualizing and using the senses," "relating the text to personal experiences," and "identifying with the poems' speakers" (p. 568). The research outcome indicated that students had significant progress in both meta-cognitive skills and affective attitudes toward poetry.

In brief, poetry can be used powerfully as an integral part of literacy and literary learning. A consensus is building among educators that a reader's affective response to poems plays an essential role in poetry instruction. The immersion approach, the holistic approach, and the feel-and-think-aloud method all emphasize that students should be exposed to rich poetry reading and at the same time provided with abundant opportunities of "reflection and refraction" about poems (Purves, 2000).

Incorporating Aesthetic Stance into Efferent Reading

Based on the research evidence discussed above, I posit that an effective approach to poetry teaching should integrate aesthetic stance into efferent reading. Table 1 presents the application of Eva-Wood's (2008) "affectively based comprehension strategies" to acquiring elements of poetry which are traditionally taught through efferent reading. These comprehension strategies regarding affectionate responses to poetry include sensory visualization, personal connection, and empathic identification. Sensory visualization is of particular value to activate readers' affective responses to text (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Students should be explicitly instructed to employ their senses and sensory recollections to visualize the imagery of the poems they read. They can verbalize descriptions or draw pictures about the sense impressions they obtain from the poem. Furthermore, by sensory visualization, students can better comprehend the figurative language used in the poem. It is well known that the language of poetry is more sensuous than ordinary discourse. Figures of speech (e.g., metaphor and simile) can be better understood through sensory imagination rather than logical reasoning. Collins (2001) accurately describes the way sensory imagination works to help readers understand figurative speech: "To follow the connections in a metaphor is to make a mental leap, to exercise an imaginary agility, even to open a new

synapse as two disparate things are linked" (cited in Showalter, 2003, p. 63).

Table 1

Coordinating Aesthetic Stance and Efferent Reading

Aesthetic Stance: Activating affective responses to text	Efferent Reading: Teaching elements of poetry[3]
Sensory visualization	Imagery
	Figures of speech
Personal connection	Theme (meaning and idea)
Empathetic identification	The speaker (voice and tone)

Another helpful strategy to initiate students' affective responses to poetry is to develop the personal connection. Students are encouraged to relate a recently read poem to their life experiences. Students can draw on their prior knowledge and past experiences to comprehend the poem.[4] Capitalizing on their own "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Greenberg, 1990), students can efficiently guide themselves to understand the poem. In this way, it is quite easy for students to engage themselves in the poetic world. Consequently, lived experiences with literature are realized through students' mental union with poetry.

In addition to personal connection, students can affectively respond to poetry by identifying with a poem's speaker. Students are encouraged to imagine they are situated as the speaker in order to experience the speaker's delight, horror, surprise, suffering, despair, or other emotion. Students who earnestly engage in this exercise will eventually empathize with the speaker.[5] The development of empathy allows student to share the speaker's ideas and values. While these feelings and thoughts resonate in their minds, students may produce a valuable, personal insight about the themes of the poem itself (Dadlez, 1997; Oattley, 2002).

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[3] A nonexhaustive list of the elements of poetry includes imagery, figurative language, allusion, tone, musical devices, rhythm, meter, and pattern (Perrine and Arp, 1992).

[4] Using prior knowledge, background information, and past experiences is an evidence-based reading comprehension strategy (Pressley, 1998).

[5] Eva-Wood (2008) listed "three levels of engagement" in the process of identifying with the speaker: "Who is this person? What does this person think and feel? Does this person's story reflect common human experiences or my own experiences?" (p. 572).

In classroom practices, teachers can first prepare a list of literary properties of a particular poem. Take Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" for example: Table 2 illustrates the formal analysis of this poem. Following the practice of efferent reading (i.e., reading for information), this poem's textual elements are detected, located, and identified. Such a literary analysis is of particular value for students to appreciate the poet's literary craftsmanship. In spite of the importance of formal investigation of a poem's literary qualities, teachers should not display this table of efferent-reading analysis to their students before they are affectively engaged with the poem. The efferent reading should not override the aesthetic reading or dominate the pedagogical process.

Table 2

Efferent-Reading Analysis of "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold

Elements of poetry	Text of poem
Theme	Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!
Diction	in the *tranquil* bay
	on a *darkling* plain
Figurative Language	
Metaphor	the sea meets the *moon-blanched* land
Simile	The Sea of Faith / Lay *like the folds of a bright girdle furled*
	the world, which seems / To lie before us *like a land of dreams*
Tone	the waves / bring / The eternal note of sadness in
Musical Devices	
Alliteration	the *long line* of spray
Consonance	On the French *coast* the *light*
Repetition	*Begin, and* cease, *and* then again *begin*
	So various, *so* beautiful, *so* new, / *Nor* certitude, *nor* peace, *nor* help for pain

Beyond the formal analysis, Table 3 presents a teacher's model for responding affectively to poetry. In the demonstration, the teacher's explicit instructions can help students understand how to apply these reader-response strategies to more fully appreciate poems.

Table 3

Teacher's Modeling of Affective Responses to "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold

Reading strategies	Protocol	Text of poem
Sensory visualization	Teacher: Let's read the lines aloud several times. OK. Here we go. Hmm, All right. Students. Pay attention to the words rich in sensory details. Label these words and phrases as sight, smell, touch, hearing, etc. The first two lines create a vivid picture for readers to witness. A picturesque beach seems to appear before the reader.	The sea is calm tonight, The tide is full, the moon lies fair
	Teacher: The words "sweet" and "cadence" appeal to the senses of smell and hearing. The sound and smell compose a sharp and vivid picture of the night seashore in the mind's eye.	Come to the window, sweet is the night-air! With tremulous cadence slow
Personal connection	Teacher: Students, you have to use prior knowledge about Sophocles. Have you ever heard of him? He was a great playwright of ancient Greece. His most famous tragedy is *Oedipus the King*.	Sophocles long ago / Heard it on the Aegean
	Teacher: Relate this verse to your experiences in life. This line definitely evokes the remembered emotions of the time you took a walk on the beach.	Listen! You hear the grating roar / Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling

Table 3 (Continued)

Teacher's Modeling of Affective Responses to "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold

Reading strategies	Protocol	Text of poem

Empathy and identification (EI)
 	
    Who is the
    speaker?
	Teacher: A man walks on the beach at night. He is quite sensitive to the surroundings. His response to the sound is not of delight, but of grief.	But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar

EI
 	
    What does the
    speaker think
    and feel?
	Teacher: The poem's speaker desires for true love. In the troublesome world nothing is dependable. To the speaker, only love is the most valuable thing, worthy of pursuit.	Ah, love, let us be true
		To one another! For the world / Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light; / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain

EI
 	
    Can I
    sympathize,
    identify with the
    speaker?
	Teacher: Since the start of recorded history, war has never ceased. Even today fighting continues as several wars between nations and people are ongoing. The speaker's sad, sorrowful tone is understandable. He is in despair. I can sympathize with his grief and sadness over the future of human beings.	Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Teachers should provide students ample opportunity to respond affectively to poetry; this can be practiced in pairs or small groups. The feel-and-think-aloud strategy is an effective meta-cognitive method of training students to aesthetically respond to poetry (Eva-Wood, 2008). Overemphasizing the formal analysis of poems on the basis of efferent reading is often counterproductive. Such a traditional teaching method might result in cultivating students' resistance to poetry. Tapping aesthetic stance into efferent reading is essential to poetry instruction.

Guiding Students to a Better Appreciation of Poetry

The ultimate goal of literature instruction in college is "to develop fluent, independent readers who turn to books for enjoyment and information" (Sloan, 2002, p. 28). If poetry teaching attempts to achieve this goal, teachers should start by fostering aesthetic reading ability in students. They should be encouraged to aesthetically respond to poems. In other words, students should learn to glean "a private experience of the sheer pleasure of being engrossed in another world" of the text (Purves, 2000, p. 212). In pedagogical practices, teachers should train students to utilize affectively based reading strategies (e.g., sensory visualization, personal connection, and empathetic identification). Aesthetically engaging students with poetic texts is indispensable to poetry teaching. Showalter (2003) stated that "the potential power of teaching poetry depends on active student engagement with both poetic language and meaning" (p. 69). By affectionate engagement with text, students can grow an authentic, personal love of poetry and then can advance to develop their literary criticism and analytical skills. In this way, students' abilities of appreciating, interpreting, and evaluating poetry will be a natural product of literature instruction, rather than the by-product of tiresome drill and rote learning.

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