

## PERSONAL-RESPONSE APPROACH VS READER-RESPONSE APPROACH IN LITERATURE-BASED ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

SO SÁNH ĐỐI CHIẾU PHƯƠNG THỨC HỒI ĐÁP TỪ CÁ NHÂN VÀ PHƯƠNG THỨC  
PHẢN HỒI TỪ ĐỘC GIẢ TRONG PHƯƠNG PHÁP DẠY TIẾNG ANH BỘ MÔN VĂN HỌC

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with an issue in the fields of English language teaching (ELT) and critical theory (CT)--the personal-response approach (PRA) vs. the reader-response approach (RRA)--whose aims are eliciting learner production of discourse in the target language in literature-based classes at the university level. These approaches have played a major role in the literature teaching and learning within communicative language teaching (CLT). This paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches and points out that the notion of PRA limits the value of the students' responses and demonstrates how the applying of RRA in literature-based language classes strengthens such an instruction. This paper takes into account some central issues of PRA and RRA such as the level of transaction, the type of transaction and the level of discourse production. Some aesthetic and socio-cultural aspects are also under discussion.

**Key words:** Personal-response approach (PRA); Reader-response approach (RRA); literature-based; English language teaching (ELT); Communicative language teaching (CLT)

### TÓM TẮT

Bài viết này đề cập đến một vấn đề trong lĩnh vực giảng dạy Tiếng Anh và lý thuyết phê bình--phương thức Hồi đáp từ Cá nhân đối chiếu phương thức Phản hồi từ Độc giả--với mục đích khởi sinh ngôn ngữ đích trong những phản hồi của sinh viên ở các lớp văn học chuyên ngữ Anh cấp độ đại học. Những phương thức này đóng vai trò chủ đạo trong phương pháp dạy và học văn học theo đường hướng giao tiếp. Bài viết này thảo luận những điểm mạnh và điểm yếu của cả hai phương thức đồng thời chỉ ra rằng ý tưởng của phương thức Hồi đáp từ Cá nhân giới hạn giá trị những phản hồi của sinh viên và việc áp dụng phương thức Phản hồi từ Độc giả ở các lớp văn học chuyên ngữ Anh thể hiện thành công. Bài viết khảo sát một số vấn đề trọng tâm của hai phương thức như cấp độ chuyển dịch, thể loại chuyển dịch và cấp độ phát sinh ngôn từ. Một vài khía cạnh về mỹ học, xã hội và văn hóa cũng được thảo luận.

**Từ khóa:** Phương thức Hồi đáp từ Cá nhân; phương thức Phản hồi từ Độc giả; dựa trên cơ sở văn chương; phương pháp dạy Tiếng Anh; phương pháp dạy và học ngôn ngữ theo đường hướng giao tiếp

### 1. Overview

When the communicative movement gained momentum in the late 1980s, much of the current use of literature in English language teaching (ELT) involved reader-response approach (RRA) and personal-response approach (PRA). Besides Rosenblatt (1976, 1995) and Iser (1978), Culler (1982) and Hirvela (1996) advocated that literature-based ELT should aim at using literary texts as a source for stimulating language activities and creating opportunities for learners to generate personal language discourse. These theorists saw the reader's interaction with and contribution to the

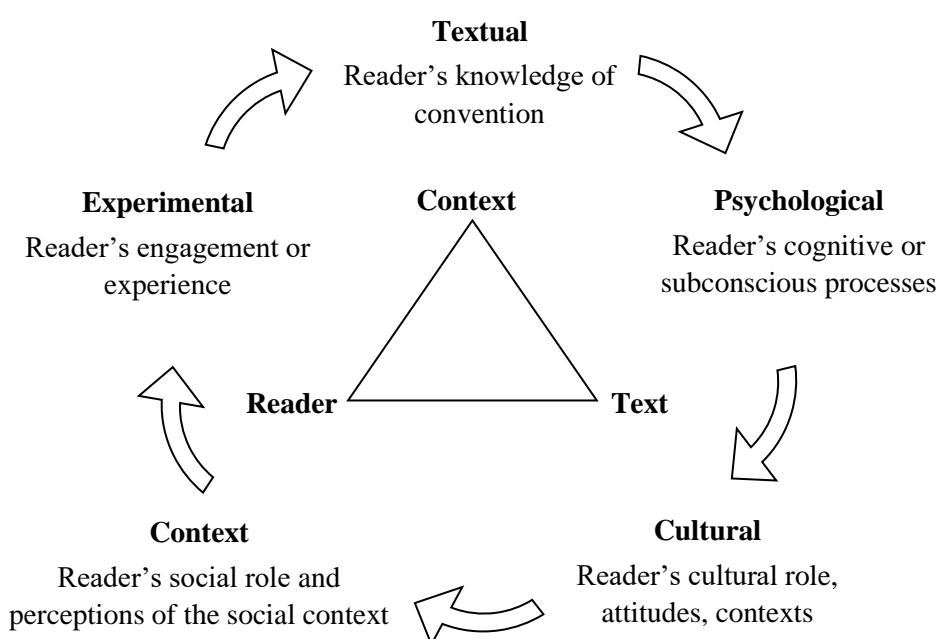
text as essential.

RRA is based on the historical development in Rosenblatt' *Literature as Exploration* in the 1930s. This theorist focused on the readers' knowledge of text conventions and their life-through experience. With increasing interest and concern of aestheticism and psychoanalysis in the 1960s and 1970s, many teachers in literature-based classes applied these approaches to investigate students' responses to texts. The rise of social constructivist, poststructuralist, feminist, and social and cultural perspectives in the 1980s and early 1990s has resulted in an increased interest

in the reader/text transaction embedded in social and cultural contexts.

Reader response critics have a tendency to focus on the four components: roles, purposes, text types, and contexts (Beach, 1993). Though each of them represents his or her viewpoints in different ways, they all seem to follow this orientation with textual, experiential, psychological, sociological and cultural perspectives. These perspectives illuminate particular aspects of the reader, text, and context transaction. While textual theorists focus on how

readers employ their knowledge of text or genre conventions to respond to specific text features, experiential theorists focus on the nature of readers' engagement or experiences with texts. Psychological theorists place much emphasis on how readers' cognitive and subconscious processes affect individual personality and developmental level. Social theorists see the influence of the social context on the reader/text transaction very important while cultural theorists state that the cultural and historical context shape students' responses.



**Figure 1.** Five perspectives representing particular aspects of the reader/text/context transaction

## 2. Discussion Questions

### 2.1. PRA vs. RRA

According to Hirvela (1996) both RRA and PRA have some points in common: (i) they both have a shared central aim of creating favorable conditions for learners to produce the

target language discourse, and (ii) they both operate within a task-based methodology. The differences between PRA and RRA occur in the four general domains (i) view of text, (ii) role of discourse production, (iii) conceptualization of tasks, and (iv) view of reading and types of questions (See Tables 1 & 2).

**Table 1.** A Summary of the Contrasts of PRA vs. RRA

ASPECTS UNDER INVESTIGATION	PERSONAL READER APPROACH	READER-RESPONSE APPROACH
<i>View of text</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Text dominates the learner</li> <li>Focus on the author's text, on responding to authorial intention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Text serves the learner</li> <li>Focus on the reader' text or evoked work, on how learner reads and creates the text</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aim: To create maximum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aim: to build upon learner discourse</li> </ul>

<b><i>Role of discourse production</i></b>	opportunities for learners to generate discourse production for the production sake)	(focus on learner's experience of the reader-text transaction)
<b><i>Conceptualization of tasks</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress on creating numerous and wide ranging tasks (each task is designed independently)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign fewer tasks (each task is carefully designed in anticipation of possible follow-up task)</li> </ul>
<b><i>View of reading</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meaning is assumed to reside in the task</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading as a productive activity in meaning</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** A summary of the strengths and weaknesses of RRA and PRA

	<b><i>PERSONAL-RESPONSE APPROACH</i></b>	<b><i>READER-RESPONSE APPROACH</i></b>
<b>STRONG POINTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stimulate students' participation in the learning process</li> <li>• Students are given chances to tackle the text through using the target language</li> <li>• Using Bottom-up Approach: Students exploit the text from word- or sentence-level. This can improve students' linguistic competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stimulate students' participation in the learning process</li> <li>• Reading literature as a productive activity in meaning:</li> <li>• Students actively participate in the learning process: Their responses to the work are a reflection of themselves as well as the text.</li> <li>• Teachers take into consideration students' experience and background knowledge: Students might interpret according to the schemata activated by the text.</li> <li>• Students are trained to take risks, to learn text talk, and to monitor their own comprehension through 'telling a story of reading'.</li> <li>• Reading literature as interaction, as a means for communication:</li> <li>• Reader and writer use the same code; writer sends the message and reader understands the message: They might have shared assumptions about the world or literary viewpoints.</li> <li>• Using Top-down approach: Questions allow for the production of more meaningful discourse. Thus, language practice is more purposeful. Students might have total understanding of the text.</li> </ul>
<b>WEAK POINTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress on creating maximum opportunities for learners to generate discourse: lack of meaningful follow-up activities. Production discourse is for production sake.</li> <li>• Reading literature as an end for communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have little opportunity to work with linguistic items (grammar vocabulary, sentence structure.. in the text.)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have little opportunity to take risks, to text talk, or to monitor their own comprehension.</li> <li>• Students might have no general view of the text.</li> </ul>	
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## **2.2. What contribution can RRA make to ELT in the university settings?**

Linguistically speaking, RRA treats reading as a transaction between literary works and living persons (Booth, cited in Rosenblatt, 1995). The concept of transaction emphasizes the relationship between the students and the text. Transaction involves not only the past experience but also the present state, interests or preoccupations of the reader; therefore, a literary work should not be considered as an object, an entity, but rather as an active process between individual reader and texts.

In light of RRA, the same text can have different meanings and values to different readers since the reading of a text occurs at a particular moment in the life history of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1938, 1976, 1995; Lazar, 1993).

RRA emphasizes the unique role of students during the reading experience who bring to the reading their own memories, feelings, and attitudes. Contrary to PRA, PRA mentions the students as an element in the learning process; however, it does not consider this as central in its philosophy. Students play the role of passive recipients who do not recognize that they are carrying on their shoulders a special mission.

RRA states that students must be free to give responses or reactions to the text. From this viewpoint, words in texts function in students' mind and how the words will function is more important than the words themselves. Thus, it is impossible to ignore students' reactions. They should start with the visions arisen from texts. From this principle, teachers might ask students what they see, feel, think and remember as they read, and encourage them to bring their personal experiences and viewpoints to the text. In this process, students can bring their lives and the

texts together, and each sheds light on the other.

RRA also emphasizes the importance of creating a feeling of security during the learning process. The classroom must be a comfortable, supportive, non-combative place, where personal ideas and matters might be addressed with delicacy and kindness. Teachers must not value correctness over investigation, conformity over exploration, answers over questions, and above all, winners over losers. By doing this, teachers have taught their students to respond humanely and gently to one another.

RRA is concerned of providing time and opportunity for students to initiate their personal sense of the work. The teacher should allow more time for students to think critically and creatively about the matter they are to speak or write about so that their sense of the points might take shape. Critical reading, creative and free writing become the main focus in the process of learning.

RRA requires teachers to look for points of contact among the opinions given by students. Since literature serves as a socializing function, it also integrates students into society. RRA suggests that teachers might use various strategies to bridge them with the real world outside the classroom. By doing this, students are encouraged to talk productively about their experiences, assumptions, values and beliefs which certainly improve their critical thinking skill.

RRA advocates that since literature provides a living-through life, it offers experience with its complicated intellectual and emotional elements. In this sense, teachers are required to awaken students' feelings, evoke their memories and provoke their objections to literary texts. Since accepting texts uncritically is a "danger" (Rosenblatt, 1976: 15), teachers should not accept any of the students' interpretations without considering their attempt

to make sense of the work.

RRA advocates that teachers need to do more than simply apply theory” (Beach, 1993) since a theory does not by itself promote students’ creativeness in terms of creating their personal knowledge via active sharing of ideas. Recognize how theories shape practice, teachers should help students know how to respond to texts.

Having made the reader and the text the point of departure, RRA advocates that the reader interprets the text, or, the reader acts on the text; in other words, the text produces a response in the reader, or the text acts on the reader (Rosenblatt, 1995). In this sense, the relationship between reader and text is not linear but each element conditions the other.

### 3. Conclusions

With the aim of creating as many opportunities as it can for the learners to generate discourse, through learning tasks, teachers of RRA can give students maximum chances to tackle the text by using the target language to generate discourse. This increases the learners’ motivation since they can have the feeling of success while engaging in the learning tasks. And when students actively participate in the learning tasks, classroom atmosphere becomes lively and relaxing.

During the transaction with the original text, students have chances to use their prior knowledge to express their ideas. By this way, students are trained to take risk, to learn text talk and to monitor their own comprehension. They might interpret according to the schemata activated by the text. As a result, their interpretation or reaction is a reflection of themselves and the text.

RRA views reading as essentially concerned with meaning, especially with the transfer of meaning from mind to mind, from writer to reader via the text. Reading for meaning here is in the sense of how students get meaning by reading and interpreting and how the writer, the reader and the text each contribute to

the process of learning.

RRA views discourse production as a means rather than an end of the task. It places much value on the students’ experience, prior knowledge and personal reactions. Any discourse produced is seen as a step towards the following discourse. In other words, any discourse can serve as a connecting point for further and related discourse production.

When reading literature is seen as an interaction, as a means, not as an end for communication, it means that reader and writer use the same code; writer sends the message and reader understands the message. In this sense, they have shared assumptions about the world or literary viewpoints.

### 4. Suggestions

Teachers of RRA should try to convince the reluctant students that reading literary texts is a great pleasure. Such pleasure can be ultimately obtained when they can base themselves on these texts to discuss things with their teacher and classmates during the lesson. The text itself provides a means for them to keep in touch with the target language. The questions related to the text might lead them to the ability of interpretation.

RRA encourages learners to take risks. It proves that reading literary texts can be fun and can give rise to a variety of interactions. It encourages students to respond to the texts subjectively and confidently. More rewarding and more significant, RRA enables students to have access to the world of the reader and to perceive the writer’s skill or aims while engaging in a wide range of language tasks.

Since students’ partly pleasure can originate from their ability to appreciate literary texts and from their confidence to trust their own perceptions, RRA enables students to respond critically to literary texts, to transfer information and to interpret skillfully. Consequently, functions such as agreement and disagreement, persuasion, argument, and suggestions are practiced in reader-response classroom contexts.

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