

Investigating the Impact of Using Literary Response Journals to Promote Critical Reading of English Literary Texts in the Libyan EFL Classroom: Towards Self-directed Learning Environments

أثر استخدام نماذج الاستجابة الأدبية في تنمية مهارات القراءة النقدية للنصوص الأدبية الإنجليزية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في ليبيا بوصفها لغة أجنبية: نحو تعلم أكثر استقلالية

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ABSTRACT

Investigating the Impact of Using Literary Response Journals to Promote Critical Reading of English Literary Texts in the Libyan EFL Classroom: Towards Self-directed Learning Environments

The use of different tools to promote learners' independent learning has been widely investigated in different language learning contexts. Research studies have revealed that literary response journals (LRJs) can enhance learners' engagement with texts, critical thinking, and reading comprehension. This study adopted a collaborative learning approach in the English Department at the University of Benghazi to investigate the impact of LRJs on developing Libyan learners' critical reading of literary texts, particularly short stories. Fifteen Libyan undergraduate students and five literature instructors participated in the study. The research process involved an initial reading of a short story, followed by comprehension questions and a reflective question. The learners were then introduced to LRJs and received detailed guidance on using them during a second reading of the same text. The journals included prompts designed to encourage critical thinking, personal reflection, and engagement with the text. Qualitative data from learners' responses and instructors' interviews were analysed using content analysis.

The findings highlighted the value of LRJs in supporting critical reading, improving textual understanding, and encouraging learners to connect literary texts with their personal experiences. The instructors' feedback also emphasised the importance of guidance and scaffolding. The study concludes that LRJs can support the development of critical reading and learner autonomy. It recommends integrating

LRJs into literature teaching and conducting further research with larger samples and longer interventions.

الملخص .

حظي استخدام الأدوات التي تساعد المتعلمين على الاعتماد على أنفسهم في التعلّم باهتمام كبير في دراسات تعليم اللغات. وقد أظهرت دراسات سابقة أن سجلات الاستجابة الأدبية يمكن أن تساعد المتعلمين على التفاعل مع النصوص الأدبية، والتفكير فيها بعمق، وتحسين فهمهم لما يقرؤونه.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة أثر استخدام سجلات الاستجابة الأدبية في تنمية مهارات القراءة النقدية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في ليبيا، من خلال قراءة القصص القصيرة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة بنغازي. شارك في الدراسة 15 طالبًا وطالبة من المرحلة الجامعية، وخمسة من أساتذة الأدب.

بدأت الدراسة بقراءة قصة قصيرة والإجابة عن أسئلة لفهمها، بالإضافة إلى سؤال تأملي يتيح للمتعلمين التعبير عن مدى فهمهم للقصة. بعد ذلك، تعرّف المتعلمون على سجلات الاستجابة الأدبية، وتلقوا شرحًا لكيفية استخدامها عند قراءة القصة مرة أخرى. وتضمنت هذه السجلات أسئلة تساعد على التفكير في النص، وفهم أحداثه وشخصياته، وربط معانيه بخبراتهم الشخصية. جرى تحليل بيانات الدراسة النوعية باستخدام تحليل المحتوى، بما في ذلك إجابات المتعلمين ومقابلات أساتذة الأدب.

أظهرت النتائج أن سجلات الاستجابة الأدبية ساعدت المتعلمين على فهم القصة بصورة أفضل، والتفكير في معانيها، وربط أحداثها بخبراتهم الشخصية. كما أوضحت آراء الأساتذة أهمية تقديم التوجيه والمساعدة للمتعلمين عند استخدام هذه السجلات. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن سجلات الاستجابة الأدبية يمكن أن تسهم في تنمية القراءة النقدية وتشجيع المتعلمين على الاعتماد على أنفسهم في التعلّم. وتوصي الدراسة باستخدام هذه السجلات في تدريس الأدب، وإجراء دراسات مستقبلية تشمل عددًا أكبر من المتعلمين وفترة تطبيق أطول.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سجلات الاستجابة الأدبية، القراءة النقدية، التعلّم المستقل، تدريس الأدب، اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية.

Introduction

Critical thinking is an intellectual process that requires active skills of conceptualization, applying, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluation of information. Such information can be gained from different sources including earlier experiences. Additionally, critical thinking involves universal intellectual values that go beyond clarity, consistency and accuracy however it is not universal in individuals. Everyone is subject to episodes of undisciplined or irrational thought. Its degree therefore depends on the depth of experience in a given domain of thinking or with respect to a particular set of questions. Therefore, the development of critical thinking skills and dispositions is a process of ongoing efforts which can be enhanced through social interaction.

Being inspired by the social constructivist paradigm, the role of social interaction has been the focus of many ESL studies (Slavin, 1991; Anton, 1999; Storch, 1999, 2005; Van Lier, 2014). In such studies, social interaction in the classroom takes the forms of 'dialogic exchanges' and 'negotiation of meaning' for learning. Social constructivism assumes that development of knowledge and different abilities including critical thinking is not separately embodied within individuals (Tobin & Tippin, 1993); instead, it happens as a result of being engaged with others in a social interactive environment (Palincsar, 1998).

It is assumed that learners have to construct their own knowledge individually and collectively. Each learner has a tool kit of concepts and skills with which he or she must construct knowledge to solve problems presented by the environment. The role of the community - other learners and teacher - is to provide the setting, pose the challenges, and offer the support (Davis, Maher, & Noddings 1990, p. 3).

Positioning the reading of English as a Foreign Language literary texts within the interpretivist epistemology demands learners' active participation. For social constructivists, engaging learners in their own learning requires the use of appropriate tools to achieve the targeted competencies. Coombs and Ostenson (2022) add that engaged involvement to respond to literary texts maintains the significant role in the way in which learners engage with challenges and questions in the literary work, even becoming more critical and reflective.

Rosenblatt (1995) stresses the significant role of the interaction between the reader and the text. She argues that readers' responses to texts including those expressed in literary response journals are essential to allow students to reflect on their own reading, express their thoughts and feelings about the literary work. She stresses that such responses develop critical thinking skills as learners engage, evaluate and interpret texts in a meaningful manner. Wilhelm (2001) adds that literary response journals enhance critical inquiry and promote deeper and more personal connections to texts fostering their intellectual responses and deeper understanding.

Accordingly, it can then be argued that LRJs can be used as an effective tool for meaningful engagement contributing to guide learners' analysis and understanding. To put it another way, it can be used to promote learners' thinking and support their communication skills developing their independent learning. For such reasons, the effect of LRJs on learning should be further researched. This investigation therefore concentrates on the effect of LRJs on the ability to read English literary texts among Libyan university students.

It is worth noting here that Libyan university teachers prioritize teaching elements of literary materials. These elements involve, for instance, the types of characters and the characterization method, the point of view, figurative language and the setting of literary texts. Libyan learners are presented with these text elements. Accordingly, they are provided with a list of examples used within each text. Although they are expected to study a very considerable number of fictional texts in their university level, Libyan EFL learners usually find it difficult to construct the meaning of such texts and to understand the different forms of fictional elements used within the texts without additional or

alternative support. With the growing number of English language learners in different Libyan educational institutions, there is an urgent need for Libyan learners to develop their abilities and skills of reading such authentic materials and develop their own independent skills. Rather than focusing on identifying the literary elements of texts, Libyan EFL learners may gain deeper understanding through the study of these texts (Mohamed,2017; Abu-baker,2017).

Besides, Libyan instructors are usually engaged in different assessment activities during their class time (Stiggins, 2001). The main assessment includes mid-term testing and final exams to assess learners' achievement (Gronlund and Linn, 1990). Such tests assess learners' overall experience with no role to the learning process itself. Recent research, however, argues that such testing systems prohibit thinking skills bringing fear and anxiety to learners and negatively affecting language development. Such testing systems may also cause learners' disappointment especially when they focus on some questions rather than others (Guskey, 2003; Shaaban, 2005). Hence, investigating learners' development of understanding is required during the whole learning process. In spite of the fact that recent reading research emphasizes the role of active learning to enhance reading (Applebee et al., 2003), to the researchers' knowledge there is no recent research investigating the effectiveness of using different strategies for reading in higher education. Therefore, this investigation fills this gap by examining the effectiveness of using LRJs as a tool to improve university students' reading comprehension of literary texts. In addition, no research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of LRJs on reading English literary texts in Libyan universities. Therefore, this research paper sets out to examine the following questions with a group of Libyan university students of English:

1. To what extent did the Libyan students believe that the literary response journal supported their own understanding of the text?
2. What were the Libyan students' perceived areas of improvement after using the literary response journal?

The research process

The researcher who herself is an instructor of English literature presented the LRJs to the participants. The researcher emphasized that the journals can be used as a boosting activity to promote their growing understanding and expand their learning outcomes. Accordingly, action research has been adopted to investigate the impact of the LRJs as an enhancement tool to find out its effectiveness (Mitchell et al., 2009). Two staff members in the Department of Literature in the Faculty of Languages at Benghazi peer reviewed the literary response journal for ethical considerations and bias.

Sampling

15 undergraduate Libyan learners in the department of literature participated and signed consent in preparation for data collection. The participants were all registered in the fifth semester. At this level of studying literature, learners are expected to respond independently to the texts and provide their own analysis. Being an instructor in the department of literature for more than 15 years, the participants study English literature in a traditional teacher-centered mode. Although they have already studied a considerable number of literary modules and passed through

official tests, including midterm and final exams for their courses. Moreover, they are usually unable to respond independently to literary texts in the teacher-centered learning setting. Therefore, the learners' autonomy during the learning process was emphasized in this investigation by utilizing critical reflections.

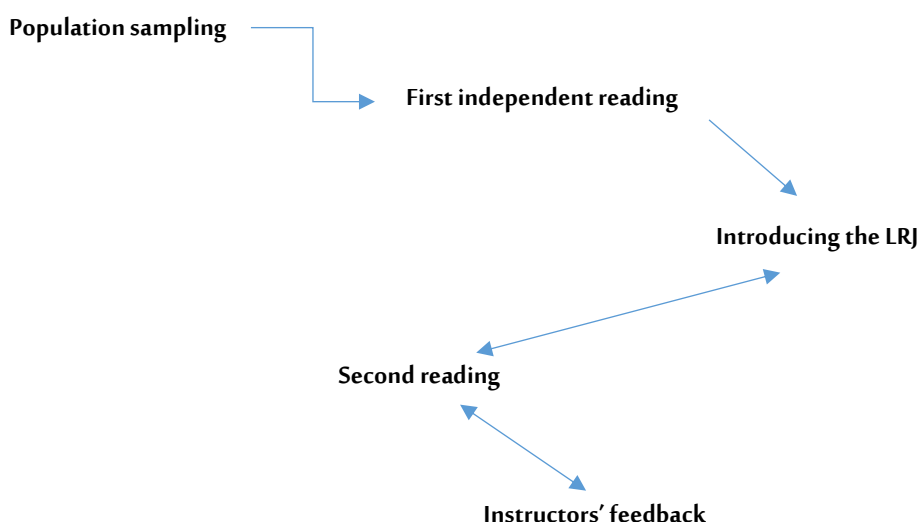
Research Process

As the participants had experience in studying and analyzing literary texts during their university experience, they were provided with access to the text regardless of their different reading abilities. To put this simply, the participants were requested to read the text independently utilizing their own strategies and critical skills guided by the literary response journals.

The research process was explained to the participants prior to data collection. They were requested to read the 'Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin. This was requested from the learners in the first session which was set on June 6 2024. The story was a part of their curriculum but they have not studied yet. Learners submitted their answers within a week in the second session on 13 June 2024. In the same session, the researcher presented a thorough explanation for the worksheet and the way of using it. They were then requested to work collaboratively and resubmit their answers utilizing the literary response journals the following week on 20 June 2024. The LRJ had questions that focus on the impact of characters' decisions and behavior and how the story would differ if different decisions by the characters were made. It also required them to provide different interpretations

The responses provided by the participants were then revised by two literature instructors in the department to detect any progress in the learners' responses to the text. Accordingly, the research process can be summarized as follows:

Figure 1: The research process



The Literary Response Journals

The sections and the questions in the LRJ were formulated by the researcher. The aim was to serve the research purpose by providing the learners with guidance to think independently and critically about the text. The LRJ included five sections that aimed to guide learners' thinking and understanding as well as their reflection about the effectiveness of the journals.

Data collection

After collecting the journals, each participant's LRJ was assigned a code number (e.g., P1, P2, P3, etc.) to ensure ethical considerations and maintain anonymity. The data collected were qualitative in nature, as all the journal prompts consisted of open-ended questions. As a result, the participants' responses were reviewed and revised multiple times by the researcher in preparation for thematic analysis. To minimize potential researcher bias, the identified themes were later reviewed and validated by another instructor from the Department of Literature. Finally, the participants' data were further refined through a process of crystallization, incorporating feedback from five experienced literature instructors to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used to organize the qualitative data into key themes. These themes were identified by examining both the lecturer's feedback and the learners' reflections for common patterns. Importantly, the keywords representing these themes were derived directly from the data, rather than being predetermined by the researcher. The analysis also included counting how often students referred to specific areas such as understanding, paragraphing, figurative meaning, and sequence of events. This frequency-based approach was complemented by descriptive analysis, particularly in relation to the final scaling question.

Findings

The participants were asked to submit the two versions of the reading text questions after each reading. Only two participants did not submit the second version. One participant did not make any changes to the LRJ. Accordingly, complete data for analysis was available for only 12 students. The collected data aimed to provide information that align with the purpose of the research questions about the participants' perceptions on the use of LRJs as well as the development of understanding based on the identified problems and the improvements made, data were crystallized with data collected from instructors' feedback.

Participants' perceptions of the LRJs

The analysis concentrated on the effectiveness of LRJs on improving learners' reading comprehension. In the reflection question in which the participants were asked 'In what ways was the Literary Response helpful to your understanding of the story?'. The participants' responses included answers such as 'The worksheet was helpful to me', 'The guidelines helped remember what to do', 'I applied the instructions while working on my journal' and 'I was making progress'. These quotations are used as they are expressed by the participants. It is also worth mentioning that these answers were related their comprehension of the story plot and literary awareness including

the figurative language as well as critical thinking to figure out the story theme and make personal connections. The use of these words was counted and categorized for the content analysis as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Perceptions on the effectiveness of LRJs

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Understanding story plot	12	100%
Literary awareness	8	67%
Story theme	11	92%
Personal engagements	11	92%

As the table reveals, the participants reported experiencing a range of benefits from using the LRJs across various dimensions of reading the story, including comprehension, critical thinking, and engagement. These findings highlight how the LRJs supported different aspects of their reading process.

Participants' improvement

The participants also reported on some perceived difficulties while reading the story. The coding process determined some problems from the participants' responses to the questions 'What difficulties did you face while reading the story? How did the LRJ help you to overcome these difficulties?' The participants' responses included answers such as 'it was difficult to', 'I went wrong', 'my challenges were', 'a minor misstep' and 'it required some changes'. These data quotes revealed the participants' difficulties when reading the text. Instructors provided feedback on the participants' second reading also reveal development in the participants' answers. The instructors' feedback included phrases such as 'improved', 'enhanced thinking deeply', 'effectively implemented' and 'related to'. Such phrases emphasize the effective role the LRJs had to improve the participants' reading experience.

Instructors' Feedback Analysis

The feedback obtained from the five literature instructors provided an additional perspective on the effectiveness of Literary Response Journals (LRJs) in supporting learners' critical reading of literary texts. The qualitative data were examined using content analysis to identify recurring themes concerning learners' engagement with the text, the development of their understanding, and the support required to use the journals effectively. Three main themes emerged from the instructors' feedback: improvement in textual understanding, the development of critical engagement, and the need for instructional scaffolding.

The instructors' feedback indicated that the learners' responses showed signs of improvement following their second reading of the short story using the LRJ. Their comments included descriptions such as "improved" and

“effectively implemented,” suggesting that the journals helped some learners reconsider their initial answers and respond more appropriately to the questions. This observation supports the view that structured reflection can guide learners towards a more detailed understanding of literary texts rather than relying exclusively on their initial interpretations.

Another theme concerned the learners’ ability to engage more deeply with the story is also found. The instructors’ feedback included the phrase “enhanced thinking deeply,” reflecting the importance of encouraging learners to move beyond identifying basic literary elements towards interpreting meaning and considering the significance of characters’ decisions and story events. The LRJs provided prompts that encouraged learners to examine the text more carefully and develop their own interpretations. This finding is consistent with the study’s emphasis on active engagement and reflection as important elements in developing critical reading skills.

The feedback also highlighted the importance of providing appropriate guidance when introducing the journals. The instructors indicated that learners required more support than initially anticipated, particularly when dealing with textual structure, figurative language, and contextual meaning. This suggests that introducing a learning tool does not automatically enable learners to work independently. Instead, learners may initially require explicit explanations, examples, and guided practice before they can use the journals effectively. Such support can gradually help them develop the confidence and skills needed to interpret literary texts more independently.

The effectiveness of the LRJs

The 12 participants completed the scale question about the significant effect of the LRJs in developing their critical reading of the story. A Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unuseful) to 5 (very useful) was used to rate the participants’ responses. The participants’ responses ranged between 4 and 5 (useful and very useful). One participant (S7) responded with 1 (very unuseful), 1 participant answered with 3 (neutral) and another 2 students (S10 and S3) responded with 2 (unuseful) as table 2 shows below:

Scaling	Frequency	Percentages
1	1	8.3%
2	2	16.7%
3	1	8.3%
4	6	50%
5	5	42%

Analysis of data from responses to the questions in the reflection section indicates that the participants were empowered to engage in a more profound reflection, drawing meaningful connections between their own experiences and the story events. The qualitative data quotations below show learners’ reflective responses:

1. The situation is different from my country
2. In Libyan culture woman have freedom

3. She was unhappy... Chopin try to tell us marriage is not always happy
4. The oppressive nature of marriage appears in many countries
5. The oxymoron is similar to women happy when leave unhappy marriage
6. She believed she deserved more even when her life wasn't bad

Discussion and implications

The current study's qualitative data analysis supports earlier research in the field (Gopal & Lee, 2022; Zainor et al., 2010; Williams, 2009; Slavin, 1991), all of which highlight the educational value of Literary Response Journals (LRJs). The results of this analysis are encouraging, showing how LRJs improve students' interpretive skills and cognitive engagement with texts. In addition to improving their understanding of literary material, participants frequently stated that using LRJs prompted them to consider the texts' themes, characters, and underlying messages more carefully. Many students reported that the journals' reflective style encouraged them to think critically, examine various viewpoints, and draw deep personal connections between what they read and their own beliefs. These perceptions were confirmed by the instructors' feedback.

To enhance improvements of reading, most of the instructors provided comments on the participants' first reading drafts. Most of the comments emphasize that they need to think carefully and to provide appropriate answers for the questions. Therefore, the journal was carefully constructed to deepen and guide their understanding. Therefore, it can be argued that LRJ worked as a tool for understanding focused on the need to improve critical reading. This suggests that the worksheet was an enhancement to guide the participants towards their potential in terms of critical reading. In other words, the LRJs helped them move beyond basic comprehension to engage more deeply with the text through questioning, interpretation, and personal reflection. The journal guided them to think independently, consider diverse perspectives, and articulate more thoughtful responses.

The instructors' given feedback on the participants' second reading showed development in their understanding. The journal helped some of the participants (S1, S5, S6, S9, and S10) to make changes to their answers in the second submission which indicated developments in their understanding. During the analysis, it was also clear that the participants used the LRJ in a way to guide their second reading and consider specific difficulties in understanding, thus positively impacting upon the reading process. The investigation demonstrates importance of using the LRJ to help the participants to think deeply to understand the language, the events, and the context, leading to an overall understanding. Additionally, analysis of the learners' data crystalized with the staff feedback revealed changes in and development of the participants' understanding. This suggests that the LRJ worksheet helped students to identify how to think deeply while reading the text and how to develop meaning during their use of the journal.

Another important point emphasized by the instructors is scaffolding. In their feedback, the instructors emphasized that they found it necessary to provide the learners with more guidance to use the journals than initially anticipated. This is simply attributed to traditional teaching approaches in Libyan higher education as stressed by earlier research (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Tntani, 2012; Abu-baker, 2017; Mohamed, 2017). The participants also needed scaffolding to extend understanding and achieve the required tasks independently. Therefore, instructors helped the participants to navigate more complex aspects of the text, particularly in relation to structure and language. This included aspects

such as understanding figurative language and contextual content. Providing appropriate scaffolding, learners gradually consolidated their understanding of these nuanced literary features, ultimately enhancing their critical skills and deepening their overall comprehension of the text.

Limitations

1. Conclusions for this investigation were drawn only from 12 participants. This small number makes it difficult to generalize findings to similar contexts. Therefore, it is recommended that future research would include a greater number of subjects to examine the effectiveness of LRJs on Libyan learners' critical reading in Libyan higher education learning contexts.
2. the time for the interventional sessions was limited to three learning sessions. While the limited number of the learning sessions provided an opportunity for in-depth investigation of learners' development of understanding during their interaction, future research needs to involve a longer time period and include more learning sessions. With the domination of the teacher-centered approaches in the Libyan context, providing more learning sessions would encourage learners to adapt to a new collaborative approach over longer periods.
3. Future research would also include more research methods. This investigation included only the LRJ as a method. Interview could provide rich information about the participants' perceptions on the effectiveness of the journals.

Future research

Future research could replicate the investigation with a larger group of participants and with diverse EFL Libyan participants including different levels of language proficiency and different age groups. This would support the generalizability of the current research findings. Future research could also use longitudinal studies to investigate the impact of LRJs on developing learners' critical reading abilities and learning autonomy. Investigating the impact over an extended period could show sustained impacts.

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