

Reader Response as a Focal Practice in Modern Language Acquisition

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Researchers in modern language instruction have criticized the traditional approach to teaching modern language literature for a number of reasons. In such an approach, comprehension of literary works is assessed by comprehension questions, which require the reader to give literal answers from the text. In a study conducted in Taiwan, Chi (1999) investigated how ten advanced college students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) comprehended and interpreted two English short stories. Chi's study showed how the reader response approach gave the students the chance to engage in a contextual, meaning-making process, and how it embodied the potential to engage readers' interest and stimulate their critical thinking. Chi concluded that teachers should re-evaluate their perspectives towards reading instruction and provide the students with a positive environment in which to make meaning personal through the transactional process. For instance, Chi explains that, because literary texts in foreign language classes have traditionally been looked upon as resources for the detailed study of structures and

form and not as the departure point for language use, foreign-language learners have long been encouraged and taught to read a text only from the author's or the instructor's perspective. Therefore, as long as the students' interpretation and comprehension of a text are consistent with their instructor's, the latter will validate the students' understanding of the texts. As a result, foreign language classes have traditionally failed to encourage readers' personal constructions of meaning in favour of their instructors' interpretations of texts.

Similarly, Chi (1999) cites an argument articulated by Davis (1989, 1992) and Cairney (1990), who have suggested that literary texts should not be considered avenues for the analysis of usage (grammar and form), but should be used to encourage authentic communication. Cook (1994) notes that when instructors use this latter approach, texts become resources which provide the readers with "opportunities for critical reading, questioning, negotiating, and the expression of meaning, as well as communication, interpretation and the exchange of meaning" (p. 2).

This article describes the implementation of the reader response approach as a focal practice (Sumara, 1995) in a third year, Spanish as a modern language class in a university setting. We explored the nature of engagement and response experienced by the students, the ways that the reader response approach as a focal practice influenced students' oral language proficiency, comprehension, interpretation, and re-interpretation of an authentic text, and the implications of using this approach in the postsecondary modern language curriculum. The design of the study was qualitative and emergent. Methods included non-participant observations, taped-recorded responses, a taped-recorded focus group meeting, and analysis of documents. Based upon the analysis of data, four main themes emerged from the data analysis: shifting roles in the modern language classroom; patterns of shared response to *La Casa en Mango Street*; students' attitudes towards a new pedagogical approach; and response to *La Casa en Mango Street*.

The review of the literature, the design and methodology, as well as the pedagogical implications of this study are discussed below.

Review of the Literature: Reader Response Theory

Hunsberger and Labercane (2002) explain that the reader response approach to teaching literature was conceptualized by theorists such as Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) and Iser (1978), whose works have focused on the reading process and on the relationship between the reader and the text.

Aesthetic reading and efferent reading are two terms that were developed by Rosenblatt (1978) when she was analyzing the stances a reader may assume when reading a literary text. *Efferent reading* refers to the conventional way in which literary texts have been approached in literature classes. In this conventional way, the reader looks for specific information and analyzes the literary text in relation to information about the author. Rosenblatt (1978) explains that in this type of reading the attention of the reader is “directed outward, toward concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, and actions to be performed after the reading” (p.24). *Aesthetic reading* refers to reading for pleasure and the analysis of a literary text in relation to the reader. Rosenblatt (1978) states that when an individual is reading a literary text aesthetically his/her attention “is centred directly on what he/she is living through during his/her relationship with that particular text” (p. 25).

Reader response, as an approach to teaching literature, differs from the New Critics’ approach to teaching literature (Ali, 1994; Courtland & Gambell, 2000; Leggo, 2001). Whereas the New Critics assumed determined positions toward literature, reader response views the act of reading as a transaction between readers and texts, a transaction in which the readers use their lived experiences, convictions, personal opinions, and assumptions to interact with the ideas in the text and create personal meaning as a result of this transaction (Iser, 1978;

Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978). Therefore, the reader response approach consists of the development of an aesthetic relationship with a text. In this approach, literature is presented as “an experience rather than as an object, and readers as active participants rather than passive consumers” (Davis, 1989, p. 421).

Numerous researchers have found inspiration in the works of Rosenblatt (1938, 1978) and Iser (1978) and have explored reader response theory and its impact in the language classroom (Bainbridge, Heydon, & Malicky, 2009; Boyd-Batstone, 2002; Cherniwshan, 2002; Courtland, French, Owston, & Stead, 1998; Cox, 2002; Dias, 2002; Wei & Miall, 2006; Golden, 2002; Labercane, 2002; Luce-Kapler, 2002; Smagorinsky, 2002; Sumara, 1994, 1995; Watt, 2002). To illustrate, Sumara (1995) combined the phrases “focal reality” and “holistic practice” earlier introduced by Franklin (1990, in Sumara, 1995) and Borgmann (1992, in Sumara, 1995) into the term “focal practice.” Sumara (1995) explains that, for him,

a focal practice is a particular activity which functions to render visible usually invisible interpersonal and intertextual relations. As well, a focal practice announces a location for an inquiry into personal and cultural histories that have preceded our involvement in any focal practice.
(p. 23)

Sumara (1995) then describes focal practice as the reading of a text in sections to allow the students to read a text privately, respond to it, and share their responses at different meetings in the course of a unit in a “book club” setting. Afterwards, the students re-read the text with the objective to discover if their original views and opinions have changed in any way after they have shared their responses with others in the class. In short, he explains that “only reading experiences which are subject to interpretation and reinterpretation create the experience of a focal practice. (...) reading and response experiences become focal practices

when the response to fiction is considered *in relation to* other readings and/or experiences" (p. 23). Sumara's (1995) theory of comprehension lies on the foundations that

"literariness" is not something which is contained in the text; rather it is a quality which emerges from the unique relation that the reader has with a text which is culturally *announced* as literary and, most importantly, which leaves enough space or indeterminacy for the reader to participate in the shaping of meaning. It is the process of anticipating, reading, and interpreting the text that announces what I am calling 'commonplace location' - an opening which functions to help the reader to shift perspective and understand her or his life differently because of the relation established with the text. (p. 20)

Reading as a focal practice can also be looked upon as a relationship between the reader and a community of readers in which, every time an interpretation of a text is articulated, it may create, among the community of readers, new meanings, new signs, and new contexts. For instance, Sumara (1995) argues that, instead of encouraging a highly individualized response, teachers should work towards creating an environment in which responses enrich the classroom and arise from the shared work of that classroom.

Sumara (1995) mentions the importance of encouraging students to represent their interpretations to literary texts in new forms "which represent the complexity of their intertextual readings and responses" (p. 25). Moreover, he affirms that "it is through this process of re-symbolizing of horizontal reading practices that students are better able to interpret the significance of their involvement with literary texts" (p.25). For example, Sumara used this approach in a grade 5/6 class in which the students, at the end of the unit, wrote essays which connected their responses to the novel, to other classroom readings, and to lived

experiences (p.25). Thus, focal practice was the means of the re-symbolizing process that the students were able to connect their interpretations of the text to a whole set of topics and personal experiences (p.25).

Similarly, Smagorinsky (2002) explains that, in the reader response context, students bring to discussions previous experiences that provide them knowledge on the topic being analyzed. In turn, these experiences inform these discussions and offer new perspectives on that topic. He contends that, through this consideration of the lived experience, the students “develop a relationship with literature and classmates that potentially enriches their understanding of themselves, the literature and one another” (p. 25). This approach enables the students to represent their learning differently and, thus, to find an imaginative way to respond to a text. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of designing activities in which students have the opportunity to produce art, music, drama, or multimedia through which the students express “how their lives have changed in relation to the changes they have seen in literary characters” (p. 100).

A number of authors (Courtland et al., 1998; Smagorinsky, 2002; Sumara, 1995) also note that an important factor when one is using reader response in a classroom is the role of the instructor. They note that the role of the instructor is that of another reader and participant and facilitator in the reading activity. To illustrate, Sumara (1995) explains that instructors should not exclude their responses to literary texts from the students’ responses. Since instructors are involved in the “ecology of the curricular experience” (p. 25), they cannot look at the commonplace location (the space created by the relations among reader, text, and the contexts of reading) as outsiders. Rather, he suggests, that instructors should become part of that location as interpreters:

Teaching literature, then, is an act of interpretation where the teacher works with the students to understand the

ever-evolving complex set of relations that includes literary readings. (...) the teacher must be prepared to reveal some of her or himself to the students, for it is impossible to talk about one's relation to the text without talking about oneself. (p. 25)

Reader Response Theory in Modern Language Literature Instruction

A number of writers contend that the reader response approach has considerable potential for modern language teaching (Ali, 1994; Boyd-Batstone, 2002; Cairney, 1990; Cook, 1994; Davis, 1989, 1992). However, although extensive research has been conducted to date to determine how reading in the modern language class affects the students' attitudes towards it or how it affects students' reading and writing proficiency in a modern language (Ali, 1994; Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, & Warschauer, 2003; Bretz & Persin, 1987; Davis, 1989, 1992; Gao, Miall, Kuiken, & Eng, 2005; Swafar, 1998; Yamashita, 2004), the question of how reading might influence the attainment of oral proficiency in a modern language by responding to a text has not been sufficiently explored.

In his review of the literature, Davis (1989) presents compelling arguments to present literature as an important element in modern language teaching. He cites Iser (1978), who views "literature as an experience rather than as an object, and readers as active participants rather than passive consumers" (p. 421). Iser (1978) describes this relationship with the literary work being two-fold: artistic and aesthetic. The artistic aspect is represented by the author's text, and the aesthetic aspect is represented by the "realization accomplished by the reader" (p. 21).

Davis (1989) suggests “the need of a pedagogical theory that takes into account cultural and linguistic factors and also encourages students to produce their own individualized meaning from the text” (p. 421). Therefore, in order to determine how modern language readers reconstructed a modern language text, Davis (1989) asked five students from an intermediate-level French class to read a passage from *Cette année-là* (Deharme, 1945). The students had to read the passage without prior knowledge or scaffolding on the book’s background and vocabulary. After the students had finished reading, they had to write, in English, all they recalled from the passage without referring back to the text.

The results from this study showed that the students had misconstrued the passage or lacked the tools to develop an aesthetic relationship with the text they were reading. These results led Davis to develop a lesson plan that attempted to teach students how to interact with a text by showing them how to monitor their responses while reading. In this lesson plan, he suggested a self-questioning strategy through reinforcement based on Iser’s theory (1978) and consistent with the reading as a focal practice approach (Sumara, 1995). Davis (1989) suggests instructors start by reading a text in segments and asking questions to the class after a segment has been read. The students, in turn, gradually learn to apply the same strategy on their own while reading a text. Davis suggested that this strategy would lead to a closer reading of the text “which is guided by textual instructions as well as by the reader’s reactions to these instructions” (p. 425). Furthermore, Davis affirms that this reinforcement strategy would lead to the acquisition of metacognitive skills (p. 426), and contends that “teacher-mediated reading guides students to understand instructions explicitly given in the text as well as provide opportunities for individual interpretations” (p. 366).

Finally, Davis notes that the reader response approach offers a comprehensive stance for interpreting and teaching narrative in a modern language class. He concludes that, if teaching is guided by using such an approach “understanding in terms of schemata is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of understanding in the broadest sense” (Davis, 1989, p. 426). Furthermore, he suggests that different texts may be taught by using self-questioning. He explains that

integrating reading into foreign languages curriculum entails multiple dialogues: between reader and text, between teaching-mediating reader and not-yet-competent reader, and amongst student readers. This dialogic process ought to make the foreign language more meaningful and, thus, make acquisition more natural. (p. 426)

Reader response as a focal practice, then, should be considered an essential component in modern language acquisition not only to develop reading proficiency in the target language, but also to develop oral proficiency in that target language. To illustrate, Ali (1994) suggests that since self-concept and motivation are important ingredients in the modern language class, reader response offers a meaningful framework for the study of literature, for it develops students as “independent makers of meaning” (pp. 295-296).

Similarly, Gao, Miall, Kuiken, and Eng (2005) explored how Chinese-Canadian and Euro-Canadian readers negotiated their cultural identities within a multicultural context, and to what extent these readers became involved in a personal way in their reading experiences. Participants in this study were asked to comment on passages that they found striking in two texts, a philosophical and a narrative text written in English by the Chinese author Lin Yutang.

Gao et al. (2005) found that differences between the two ethnic groups of readers took place only when they responded to the narrative text. For instance, Chinese-Canadian readers exhibited a style of reading indicating a familiar connection with Chinese culture by comparing their life world and the world of the text, and explicitly referencing to cultural contrasts. However, Euro-Canadian reader exhibited a style of commentary that combined evocative elaboration with a form of identification that situated them within the implicit "we" of the text. Gao et al. note that the styles of reading exhibited by both ethnic groups reflected the different ways in which they found themselves implicated during the act of reading. These scholars suggest that these different ways could be described respectively as similes or metaphors of personal identification.

In the study described in this article, the reading unit titled "An aesthetic response to Sandra Cisneros's *La Casa en Mango Street*", developed by the instructor/researcher provided the participants with a context in which to respond aesthetically and artistically to literature in a modern language. As part of their activities, the students read the book independently, discussed orally their interpretations and re-interpretations of the book and supporting reading materials in small groups and with the entire class.

Design and Methodology

The sample chosen for this study was a group of 10 adult third-year Spanish Language and Culture students enrolled at a northwestern university in Canada. These participants were selected for this study because they had been enrolled in the program for three consecutive years and had a demonstrated interest in the Spanish language and the cultures this particular language represents. In addition, they possessed

a demonstrated knowledge of the Spanish language at this level which allowed them to establish discussions in this language.

Methods used in this study included taping students' responses to two texts, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the study, participant observations, a taped focus group meeting, and analysis of documents. These documents consisted of observer's fieldnotes and a journal, participants' final responses to the novel and verbatim transcription of the taped responses and the focus group meeting. All observations during the response activities were described and reflected upon in a journal. The information from these documents was analyzed on the basis of emerging themes and patterns. The participants had the choice of doing their final responses/projects individually or in groups. Data analysis was constant-comparative (Creswell, 2009).

Themes

The organization of the unit, as well as the activities conducted allowed participants to engage with and respond aesthetically to *La Casa en Mango Street*. In addition, the participants in this study were given the opportunity to represent their final responses to the novel in different modes of response: oral, drama, music, and multimedia. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: Shifting roles in the modern language classroom; Patterns of shared response to *La Casa en Mango Street*; Students' attitudes towards a new pedagogical approach; and Response to *La Casa en Mango Street*

Shifting Roles in the Modern Language Classroom

This study provided insights regarding the shift in roles that the instructor and the students experienced when the first author attempted to give the students the responsibility for their learning of a modern

language and when he became another participant in the learning process. Initially, the participants had difficulty accepting these new roles, but came to appreciate and value them towards the end. The following examples demonstrate the students' and the first author's perceptions of their new roles as they were experiencing them:

I thought it [this approach] was different altogether. I was used to reading for content so I was panicking when I didn't know who was who and what was going on. It was out of the norm to read a book like that, which is a good thing because it's chance to learn different things. (Elena, Focus Meeting, p. 7)

This approach gave people more of a chance to participate because sometimes a book doesn't affect everyone in the same way. We talked about the themes and we could get a good conversation going. (Elena, Focus Meeting, p.8)

This was a refreshing way to do a reading because you could automatically just relate it to yourself and you didn't have to worry about interpreting things the wrong way. Because in literature I've found that in my class you do have to interpret things a certain way and you're supposed to get a certain meaning out of a certain text and if you don't get it, you learn it and then you know it for the test. (Olivia, Focus Meeting, p. 9)

This finding supports previous research findings obtained by Canterford (1991), Courtland (1992), Courtland et al. (1998), Smagorinsky (2002), and Sumara (1995). As demonstrated by the findings of this study, the instructor was another participant in the learning activity and a facilitator of this activity. Sumara (1995) suggests that instructors should

not exclude their responses to texts from those of the students' (p. 25). Courtland et al. (1998) explain that instructors need to go through the process of engaging themselves in order to get students motivated to read (p. 340).

Similarly, another role was that of scaffolding students' learning by modelling responses and fostering an environment of reader response (Boyd-Batstone, 2002). Participants also read complementary texts that promoted their comprehension of the novel and promoted metacognitive skills by increasing the participants' awareness of strategies they might use to increase their comprehension and understanding of vocabulary of the novel. This practice is consistent with Smagorinsky's (2002) idea that an instructor learns while he/she teaches and engages with students (p. 21).

Patterns of Shared Response to *La Casa en Mango Street*

Participants used a number of strategies to comprehend the novel and the instructor made some interventions to assist participants in this process. One of these strategies, using the dictionary, made reading for many participants tiring and time-consuming. However, this pattern changed when the participants established a balance between using the dictionary, obtaining assistance from the instructor and other members of their response groups, and from the complementary materials used to support the comprehension of the novel.

Thus, an interpretive community developed when the participants made the novel their own and negotiated meaning to arrive at a consensus while discussing it. This finding is consistent with Chi's (1999) study, in that "reading became a process of transaction, during which my participants owned and negotiated meaning, and, in turn, inquired and grew" (p. 16). In addition, this finding is consistent with Boyd-Batstone's (2002), and Gao et al.'s (2006) notion on the relationship that

exists between reader response and culture. In this study, an interpretive community also developed as the participants negotiated their cultures with each other, with the instructor's and the culture represented in the novel. Similar to Boyd-Batstone's findings, the instructor became a co-learner while the students shared their responses (pp. 133-134). Boyd-Batstone (2002) affirms:

Sharing knowledge and action, especially in classrooms in which the teacher may not necessarily share the cultural backgrounds of the students, requires significant degree of cultural negotiation. (...) Essentially, reader response invites cultural negotiation as a way of affirming how each one thinks and comes to an understanding of a text.
(p. 134)

In the same way, group collaboration and role-modelling allowed the participants to share their personal experiences, cultural knowledge, and experiences with other cultures. For example, Vera (one of the participants) always found a connection between different events in the novel concerning the lives of immigrants in the United States and an immigrant family she knew personally in Canada.

This finding also supports Vygotsky's (1978), Einer's (2002), Sumara's (1995), and Bainbridge, Heydon and Malicky's (2009) notions that meanings are socially constructed since each member of the response groups had something to contribute to the discussions. These contributions, in turn, helped to clarify meanings of words and negotiate interpretations of the novel. This finding corresponds with Sumara's findings in which the students made "connections among the text, their own layers of comments, and topics that were being generated and were unfolding in class discussions" (p. 21). It is also consistent with Gao et al's (2005) findings when they note that the styles of reading exhibited by the participants in their study reflected the different ways in which they found themselves implicated during the act of reading.

Students' Attitudes Towards a New Pedagogical Approach

The instructor placed an emphasis on the participants' understanding of the story and not on grammatical structures. The students experienced a shift in their attitudes towards reading from the moment they understood that grammatical correctness was not the main focus of the approach and that the emphasis was being placed on their personal and collective interpretations of the novel. This attitudinal shift resulted in an increased motivation to read and speak in class. The following excerpts from the researcher's journal demonstrate this shift in attitude:

The students seemed much more involved in the discussions. This time, even a student started the discussions. It looks like the more students are in contact with this type of work with a book, the more they understand that the discussions are not about giving an expected answer, but what they interpret from the novel. (Researcher's Journal, p. 8)

Amanda and Liliana are two participants who, at the beginning of the study, were reluctant to speak during the discussions and as the study has progressed they have become more active and involved in the discussions and have started to make connections between the novel and their own lives. They have so much to say. You can see the satisfaction in their faces at the end of the class because they have been able to cross that bridge. (Researcher's Journal, p. 8)

Response to *La Casa en Mango Street*

Participants changed their reading patterns from reading for specific, prescribed information (efferent) to reading for pleasure (aesthetic). By reading and re-reading the novel aesthetically, they were able to make personal and intertextual connections which helped them comprehend the novel. For instance, one participant's reading and response to *La Casa en Mango Street* became resymbolized in a poem (See Figure 1). Similarly, another participant's interpretations and re-interpretations of the same novel were summarized in a song that referred to chapters in the book and the music he composed for the song not only reflected the musical diversity of the Hispanic world, but also reflected a determined mood that, to him, characterized that specific chapter (See Figure 2). His interpretation of the novel "transformed the act of reading and response to a focal practice" (Sumara, 1995; p. 11).

As Ali (1994) found earlier, this strategy provided the participants with the tools to think critically and creatively because there were no "threats nor any compulsion to learn the correct answer or to compete for the best interpretation" (p. 294). Therefore, ideas and thoughts flowed naturally as a result of the small and whole class discussions, and the re-reading of the novel.

This finding is also consistent with Sumara's (1995) findings in that the participants in this study also represented their interpretations in new forms (p. 25). Independent reading provided the setting for focal practice described by Sumara (1995) as a "particular activity which functions to render visible the usually invisible interpersonal and intertextual relations" (p. 10).

As suggested by Smagorinsky (2002), Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky (2009), Courtland and Gamble (2000), and Boyd-Batstone (2002), each participant in this study had the opportunity to create their own aesthetic response which was different from those of their classmates.

The focus of their presentations varied and was enriched through transmediation of sign systems such as poetry, drama, music and digital literacy. In other words, the participants in this study found a way in which they could represent “the complexity of their intertextual reading and response activities” (Sumara, 1995, p. 25) and allowed them to show their learning in different ways and, thus, a suitable way to respond to the novel. Furthermore, as suggested by Bainbridge, Heydon, and Malicky (2009), these activities allowed the participants in this study to construct new meanings bring their knowledge together and express it through various modes of response such as the visual arts, music, drama, writing and dialogue.

Allí él está en el sol, descansa En el sol descansa después de un día muy largo Se pregunta por qué esto era lo pone Ser tan cansado después de trabajar La mirada en sus ojos parece tan esperanzado	<i>There he is under the sun, resting He is resting under the sun after a long day. He wonders why things are this way. To be so tired after work The look in his eyes seems so Hopeful</i>
Los niños juegan Y toman mi mano Soy una nueva amiga Para verlos Para escucharlos Para estar con ellos	<i>The children are playing And take my hand I am a new friend To match them To listen to them To be with them</i>
Veo la manera en que ellos viven En esta tierra, esta tierra duro Y como ellos sobreviven	<i>I see the way they live On this land, this tough land And how they survive</i>
Ellos viven sus vidas el mejor que ellos pueden Ellos comparten su amor con el otro Y ellos lo compartieron conmigo.	<i>They live their lives the best they can They share their love with each other And they shared it with me</i>

Figure 1. Amanda's Poem

Unica	Unique
Cuatro árboles flaquitos, yo parezco uno de ellos Alta, delgada, creciendo, a pesar de los ladrillos Su fuerza es secreta, con raíces bajo tierra Aunque escoges tu propio camino, lo que fue era lo que era.	<i>Four thin trees, I look like one of them Tall, thin, growing, in spite of the bricks Her strength is secret, with roots underneath the earth No matter what road you take, what will, will be</i>
Nene niño no te vayas por ahí Canta en español conmigo	<i>Baby boy don't go that way Sing in Spanish with me</i>
Papá porque despiertas, cansado en la oscuridad Ahora me toca a mí pasar la noticia a los demás Aunque no soy bella tampoco seré cruel, Yo seré muy fuerte, quiero ser como tú	<i>Father, because you wake up tired in the darkness Now it is my turn to pass the news to everyone else. Even though I'm not pretty I will not be cruel Esther I will be very strong, I want to be like you.</i>
Lisandra, o Maritza, o Zeze la décima Tu fuiste bautizada con un nombre de esperanza Tu vieja te grita que fuiste mal nacida, Que tú irás al infierno por impersonar a tu tía	<i>Lisandra, or Maritza, or Zeze the tenth one You were baptized with a name of hope Your mother yells at you and tells you were born cursed and that you will go to hell for impersonating your aunt</i>
Hogar es una casa en una fotografía Yo me las veía donde trabajo todo el día Por el vecindario, escuincles huelen a escoba Aquí es donde viven los pobres y los que roban	<i>Home is a place in a picture I used to see them where I work all day Around the neighborhood, there are kids who smell like broom Here's where the poor and those who steal live</i>
<u>Lo único que falta, que tengas la razón</u> <u>Es una casa nueva, hecha de corazón</u>	<u><i>What you need to be right</i></u> <u><i>Is a brand new house, made out of love</i></u>
Pobre Sally a su papi, no le hizo caso Cuando vuelva a su casa, le da puñetazos Por hablarse con los niños, quizás los del carnaval	<i>Poor Sally, she didn't obey her dad When she returns home, will beat her up because she talked to the boys, maybe those from the carnival</i>
<u>Lo único que falta, que tengas la razón</u> <u>Es una casa nueva, hecha de corazón</u>	<u><i>What you need to be right</i></u> <u><i>Is a brand new house, made out of love</i></u>

Figure 2. Javier's song *Única*

Discussion

The study took place within the context of a thematic unit in a Spanish as a modern language class. The organization of the unit, as well as the activities conducted, allowed participants to engage critically with and respond aesthetically to *La Casa en Mango Street*. Reader response approach as a focal practice was an effective tool for the implementation of the unit.

Scaffolding provided participants with the necessary support so that they could conceptualize the concepts and Hispanic culture and generate personal understandings of the novel. The strategies that enhanced their creative skills and that promoted comprehension and metacognitive awareness were: complementary materials that supported and expanded on the issues raised by the novel, small group and whole class discussions; and the creation of final responses to the novel.

Small group and whole class discussions provided the forum for the students to comprehend the issues and concepts related to immigration, discrimination, women and children abuse, and gender issues. The gaps in the text allowed the participants to negotiate meaning with each other and resulted in an enhanced awareness of the previously mentioned issues.

Motivation to learn Spanish and about the Hispanic cultures was high among these participants. However, initially, participants did not possess the vocabulary in Spanish that would enable them to express their ideas. This lack of vocabulary affected some of the participants' self-concepts negatively and this perception, in turn, prevented them from participating in the discussions. However, these students and the rest of the participants developed positive attitudes towards reading and speaking in a modern language classroom as the study progressed. The changes in these attitudes were related to the new roles for both students and instructor.

Because the focus of the unit was on comprehension rather than grammar and vocabulary, students became more comfortable expressing their interpretations of the novel in Spanish over time. Group collaboration was also a relevant factor that led to this increase in motivational levels towards reading and speaking in a modern language. The patterns of shared response opened a window into the processes in which the participants became involved in order to respond to the novel.

The participants made an effort to communicate in Spanish when they were in small groups, in their interpretations and re-interpretations to the novel. In addition, they not only established intertextual connections, but they also established interpersonal connections between the novel and their lived experiences.

The results of this study have several research and pedagogical implications for the implementation of the reader response approach as a focal practice to modern language literature.

Firstly, taking into consideration that reading is a transactional process, reader response as a focal practice offers a very effective framework to develop critical thinking and in-depth/critical analysis of texts while using the target language. This approach also invites students to engage with literature in ways that will increase their motivation to read and speak in class. Further, this approach offers students the opportunity to bring to the classroom lived experiences and expertise they would not have opportunities to share in a traditional literature class. This approach promotes social learning and fosters a new-found appreciation of others in the classroom. Furthermore, the intertextuality of cultural materials became devices for greater socio-cultural engagement (Boyd-Batstone, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978) and, as a result, language and culture were less distinguished; instead, one enriched the engagement of the other for the students.

All the discussions and presentations were carried out in Spanish. This constitutes one major step for the participants who were reluctant to speak in Spanish in front of the class at the beginning of the study. As the study progressed, they started to lose this fear and began to share their ideas with the rest of the class. In going beyond the novel, the participants recreated the story in their minds and experienced other ways of interpretation. In doing so, they came in contact with aesthetic values of the novel and came to understand themselves as active readers (Ali, 1993). As demonstrated by their final responses, the “activities and the discussions created a kind of dialogue between the students and the text” (Ali, 1993; p. 294). Moreover, as Vande Berg (1990, 1993) suggests, the novel and complementary materials served as the basis for the exchange of ideas in which participants focused on message rather than form and used Spanish to present and to justify their opinions. This, in turn, fostered authentic oral communication.

Secondly, instructors of language in general and modern languages in particular should revisit their assumptions about literature teaching. Traditionally, the emphasis has been placed on the author’s intended meanings and the repetition of these meanings by the students through comprehension questions with prescribed answers. The New Critics’ approach to language teaching and learning, as well as current practices of teaching/assessment, have led students to view what they read for our classes as an obligation which renders neither pleasure nor satisfaction. Therefore, modern language literature classes should encourage focal practice by providing the students opportunities to engage with texts and respond to them in ways that would bring out the best of themselves.

The findings presented here are an important contribution to research in modern language teaching and learning for they demonstrate how the participants came to comprehend the novel and understand the issues that were presented in it. The comprehension, interpretation and re-

interpretation of the novel were never assessed by comprehension questions. Instead, they were achieved through group work and constant negotiation of meaning among each member of the response groups. Furthermore, students had the opportunity to showcase their outside of school skills, which, in the end, added to their motivation to respond to the novel.

Thirdly, the success of the implementation of the reader response approach as a focal practice to the teaching of modern language literature depends, in part, on how instructors are able to motivate the students to read, and how the program is organized and implemented. It depends as well on how instructors reconceptualize their traditional roles in the classroom to that of facilitators, participants in the learning activity, coauthors and colearners.

The unit plan developed for this study offers a model for the development of a curriculum that supports readers' engagement and response in a modern language. The factors that promoted the types of responses obtained in this study were as follows: organization of the unit; the time the students had to read independently and respond in small group and whole class discussions; the time the participants had to engage in focal practices, re-read and re-interpret the novel and complementary materials; sufficient scaffolding provided by the instructor; and presentations that enhanced personal choice.

The following recommendations will aid modern language instructors in the planning, development, and implementation of a unit using the reader response as a focal practice approach to literature:

Planning

1. The unit should be based on the reader response framework. In this study, reading as a focal practice was effective.

2. The unit should support the conceptual framework through the use of texts, experiences and assignments that are conceptually related. This, in turn, will promote social construction of meaning. Therefore, it will support the reader response model and reading as a focal practice.
3. The unit should include teaching strategies/opportunities for learning which scaffold students' understanding of concepts and context and which support the conceptual framework.
4. The unit should be implemented over a sustained period of time such as a semester or the full academic year. Students should understand what responding to a text entails; they may well need scaffolding during their first attempts at interpreting a literary piece. As well, they need time to be introduced to new roles as speakers and readers.

Development

1. Lessons should be scheduled so that students have enough planned time to read independently, and to respond in groups and in whole class discussions.
2. Other texts (i.e., film, poetry, etc.) to be read independently in class should be incorporated. These texts complement the book being read, and broaden and deepen students' understanding of the thematic and cultural context of the central book being studied.
3. Assignments should encourage students to investigate, reflect and present their results to the class. The Research Quest Model (BCTLA, 2003) provides an excellent framework to have students develop media literacy skills in a modern language.
4. Encourage the use of a journal in which the students write their evocations and reflections after they finish reading a chapter.

These reflections will help them reconnect with the reading while in the small group and whole class discussions. Further, the journal may aid them in the final presentations.

5. Select a book that is not only appropriate to the age group, but is also at the language level of the students so that they can read independently without the assistance from others (Bainbridge, Heydon, & Malicky, 2009). However, consider that the students will also need activities that challenge them in order to learn at their full potential (Bainbridge, Heydon, & Malicky, 2009). Consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, the level of difficulty of the texts should be such that it encourages students to seek support or guidance from each other and the instructor in order to achieve success in the reading activity (Bainbridge, Heydon, & Malicky, 2009).

Implementation

1. Students should be advised of the expectations of the unit, methods of evaluation, and the types of activities that will be used.
2. Model responses and presentations prior to their introduction. Students need to know what to do and, as this study showed, they may need this modeling to know precisely what is expected of them.
3. Do not discourage the use of the first language during small group and whole class discussions. Many students do not possess many of the skills required to respond to a book aesthetically. Therefore, they will always try to find support in their first language to aid them in their oral responses.
4. Pay attention to students at the same time you are participating in the discussions. This procedure may prove to be a difficult task,

but it will help in addressing problems or concerns students might have.

5. Build in student-instructor conferences to address particular questions.

Evaluation

1. Allow students to decide whether they wish to do their final responses in a group or individually. As demonstrated by this study, since university students have different schedules, sometimes arranging meetings will prove a challenge for them.
2. Allow students freedom in the way they respond to the literary pieces through multiple symbolic systems.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest that further research is necessary to continue to explore the effects of the use of the reader response approach as a focal practice to literature in the modern language classroom. As well, further research on the implementation of this approach would also explore more in-depth modern languages instructors' perceptions towards new pedagogical approaches to modern language literature instruction. The present findings may be used to inform these future research studies.

Note

1. All names used are pseudonyms

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