

# Shifting EFL trainee teachers' reading experiences: a study using diaries

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## Abstract

The present article describes a study focused on how the use of diaries while reading may affect the nature of the literary response of teacher trainees. To begin with, the need for a more balanced reading experience is supported, making special emphasis on the characteristics of an aesthetic stance. Then, a detailed description of the research tools, participants and procedures is included. To finish with,

analysis of data and conclusions obtained from them are presented and justified. Conclusions show that, in general, diaries are successful in balancing teacher trainees' reading responses, and in making them shift their stance towards a more aesthetic experience of literature while using them.

## Keywords

Reading, EFL, literary aesthetic response, teacher training.

## Estudio a través de diarios de las experiencias lectoras de los estudiantes de Magisterio (LE)

## Resumen

El presente artículo describe un estudio centrado en conocer cómo el uso de diarios como complemento a la lectura puede afectar a la naturaleza de la respuesta literaria de los estudiantes de Magisterio. En primer lugar, se defiende la necesidad de una experiencia lectora más equilibrada, haciendo especial énfasis en describir la postura

(*stance*) estética. Posteriormente, se describen detalladamente las herramientas de investigación, los participantes y los procedimientos. Para finalizar, se analizan los datos y se presentan, y justifican las conclusiones obtenidas de ellos. Las conclusiones muestran que, en general, los diarios equilibran las respuestas lectoras de los estudiantes de Magisterio, logrando una experiencia literaria más estética mientras los emplean.

## Palabras clave

Lectura, inglés como lengua extranjera, respuesta literaria estética, formación de profesores.

## Introduction

In a previous research, Fernández Fernández (2005) highlighted the need to balance efferent reading (reading to get information), and aesthetic reading (reading to feel) in the classrooms. This need stems from the fact that reading literature in EFL classrooms too often consists in knowing what the student has carried out from the text, efferent reading. One of the reasons why teachers make emphasis on the efferent approach to reading may be their own reading experiences, and the teacher training they have received (see Fernández Fernández, 2006). The aim of this study is, consequently, to make teacher trainees aware of their own reading experiences by using a teaching methodology which could prove to raise readers' aesthetic awareness, considered as a process along which:

(...) the reader must broaden the scope of attention to include the personal, affective aura and associations surrounding the words evoked and must focus on — experience, live through—the moods, scenes, situations being created during the transaction» (Rosenblatt, 1995 (1938): xvii).

Diaries were considered the appropriate tool to aid trainees encounter their «own voice» during the reading process. According to Bailey (1990: 215) a diary study is a «first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience, documented through regular,

candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events». Diaries have been used to research on teacher trainees in EFL contexts (see for example Halbach, 1999a and 1999b), or to research on aesthetic responses of school graders in native contexts (see Samione, 2002 or Prather, 2001). On the other hand, teacher trainees' approach to literature has been researched by Fernández Fernández (2005) and, in a native context, by Domaille (2003), but without using journals or diaries. Therefore, there seems to be little work done, or at least published, on the use of diaries to promote aesthetic reading of teacher trainees in EFL contexts, and even less in Spain. For this reason, this study will try to, as far as possible, set a starting point to research on this issue taking as a framework the Spanish educational framework.

## The teacher as reader

During many years the teacher has played a traditional role in the classrooms, putting into practice what has been termed «spoon-feeding» methods. The teacher «absorbed» knowledge to transmit it to students. In the case of literature, teachers were supposed to use literary criticism to assess the validity of their students' reading responses. When dealing with reading in EFL contexts, this view of literary experiences contrasts with the existence of communicative methods, which seek students' voices in the classroom. The teacher is not a source of knowledge anymore, but a facilitator, or a mediator (see Delanoy, 1997) in the students' learning process. To play this role, it is necessary to pay attention to the teachers' own reading experiences, and how they can shape the subsequent use of literary texts in their classrooms. This reflection on their reading experiences will hopefully lead to act upon their

teaching, changing those behaviours, attitudes and practices which may influence their students' view of literature in a negative way.

### **Research questions**

The research questions set out in this study were:

- Do trainees' writings reflect their efferent-reading training?
- Do trainees' writings reflect a shift towards a more aesthetic oriented reading?
- Does the diary raise trainees' awareness on the way literature is used in the classrooms? Is there any type of metacognitive reflection on the way they perceive literature?

The present study can be classified as classroom-based, as the researcher was also the lecturer of the subject and this research aims at obtaining information to improve the way trainees approach reading and how this view can influence the way they would teach reading English as a Foreign Language. The information given is qualitative, as it has been obtained by using an introspective research tool, a diary. The information gathered with the diary has been completed with observation and field notes taken by the lecturer/researcher during the guidance sessions.

### **Variables**

Many are the variables which can influence the teaching/learning process. In this specific study, there were some aspects which could influence trainees' responses and, accordingly, the data analysed. First, the fact that the lecturer did not have any information about the aspects of his/her trainees which could

affect the way they responded to literature, such as their reading habits, the previous experiences with literature, and their proficiency in English (specially their reading and writing skills). Another issue which could influence their responses was the learning styles of trainees, as diaries are a resource to foster the intrapersonal learning style (see Gardner, 2000), and trainees which do not favour this style could feel uncomfortable when carrying out a task of this kind.

A very important variable was the book itself, which was *The House of Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (1984). The results could be different according to different genres, and it can be the case that trainees do not find this book attractive or interesting enough to comment on. The fact that trainees carried out the completion of this diary in complete isolation, and that they only put in common their literary experiences with the rest of the class in two guidance sessions deprived them of the opportunity of assimilating other literary experiences. This could also influence the way trainees faced the task of completing a diary.

The main research hypothesis was that trainees would tend to use an efferent orientation towards the text, and that their diaries will reflect their difficulties to express their personal views and transactions with the text. This assumption was stemmed from a previous research focused on the analysis of the materials (graded readers, textbooks and self-made reading guides) used in a group of EFL classrooms (see Fernández Fernández, 2005: 231-234). Accordingly, it was also expected that trainees would shift towards a more aesthetic response to the text conditioned by the tool used, that is, diaries.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were a group of 22 teacher trainees. They were women whose age ranged between 18 to 30 years old. Five of them were already graduated as Primary Education teachers and were studying to be qualified as Foreign Language (English) specialists at a private university college, Escuela Universitaria Cardenal Cisneros, set in Alcatá de Henares, Madrid (Spain). All of them were Spanish native speakers, and had been studying English in academic settings for at least ten years.

### Tool

The main tool to carry out this study was the diary. The use of diaries as an introspective research tool is not new in EFL reading and teaching research, and it has proved to be useful when collecting information in this field (see Nunan, 1992: 118). It was chosen because it fulfilled a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, diaries, as introspective research tools, were an invaluable resource to collect information about the mental processes of this group of trainees. On the other hand, diaries could be studied as a valid tool to help teacher trainees make the shift towards a more aesthetic approach to reading. Diaries were preferred to recordings of debates or discussions in class because they respect the learning pace of trainees, letting them reflect on the thoughts provoked during their reading. Students' limited competence in oral English was also seen as an obstacle to obtain valuable information on trainee's responses.

The diaries of participants were analysed, and following a qualitative research procedure, patterns and regularities were

sought to establish main categories, such as «empathic», «link to own experiences», «link to other reading experiences», «social awareness», etc. These categories had to do with trainees' behaviours, opinions and attitudes towards reading and will be discussed in the «Analysis and discussion» section.

### Research schedule

Trainees were asked to read a book during one term (16 weeks). The reading assignment was part of the requirements to sit the exam for the subject «English language and methodology», included in the curriculum to obtain the degree of Foreign Language (English) Teacher in Primary Education in Spain. The study was carried out from February until June, 2006. In February, trainees were asked to buy a notebook to use it as a diary. They were also given a handout with a sticker to glue on their notebooks. This sticker contained the main instructions (see Appendix). They were asked to buy the book and, in March, they started reading it. During these months the lecturer, who was also the researcher, held two «guidance» seminars. During these seminars, some chapters of the book were read and commented without any structured questionnaire or handout at hand. The main aim was to elicit trainees' spontaneous reactions towards the text.

During the last weeks of April and May, the teacher asked for all the diaries to check that trainees understood what to do (it was an in-process revision). To reinforce the aesthetic stance, the teacher added comments on content, such as «I agree!» «Really?» «I would like to know why you feel so sad reading this chapter», etc. In some occasions, she exchanged her views on the reading or included short paragraphs commenting on trainees' experiences.

## **The book**

The book chosen was «The House on Mango Street» by Sandra Cisneros. There are many reasons to justify the election of this book. First, its convenient length, which make it appropriate to be read in an academic term. Second, its availability, although the book was published in the 80s, it has been subsequently edited. Third, the topic may also be attractive, as it describes, in first-person narrator, the life of Esperanza, a girl who lives in a low-class neighbourhood in the USA. Fourth, the fact that the story is written using a first-person narrator, which makes readers feel close to the story (and to the main protagonist), and stimulates them to enter the literary world. This is an advantage when writing the diary, as trainees are more inclined to have something to comment on. Apart from this, the book was also useful to foster the multicultural awareness included in our teacher-training curriculum.

## **Data analysis and results**

The diaries of the 22 participants were read and commented twice. The first time the main purpose was to encourage trainees' personal response, and to check that they have understood the activity. The second time, information about the way trainees responded to the book was collected and classified according to the three research questions set at the beginning of the study.

With regard to whether trainees' writings reflected their efferent-reading training, this aspect became clearer when, after having introduced the task in class, trainees asked the lecturer how to fill in the diary again. Trainees were quite surprised by having to write without

summarising any content or answering comprehension questions. Some even made clear that they did not consider their opinions and personal views «so interesting to be written down». Some trainees showed an efferent approach to the task, and they included summaries in the diaries, although they were clearly forbidden in the instructions to complete the task. This fact was spotted after the first revision of diaries (an in-process revision to check that trainees understood the task). When efferent approach was identified, the lecturer gave ideas such as «try to think as if you were the main character», «relate what you read to your experiences, other books, films...», to encourage trainees' aesthetic response to the text.

The second research question was centred on the progress of trainees' writings, and if they progressively reflect a more aesthetic oriented experience of literature. The book made trainees' involvement in the literary experience easier, and created an increasing engagement with the story and, more specifically, with the main character, Esperanza. One proof of this is how trainees addressed Esperanza directly at the end of their diaries, wishing her the best in her life and showing empathy towards her. These comments made by trainees show the degree of aesthetic involvement with the book which, although superficial, could be considered a good background to build up their aesthetic experiences.

In relation to whether the diary raises trainees' awareness on the way literature was used in the classroom, or if there was any type of metacognitive reflection on the way they perceive literature, this was not reflected in the diaries, but the reason could be that they were not asked to do so. Nevertheless, trainees commented on this task when they collected their

diaries back. Some trainees said that it was the first time they did something similar with a book, and that it had been an interesting experience. There is also a lack of metacognitive reflection on the way they perceive literature, understood as paying attention to the mental processes undergone during the reading process. Trainees had little or no opportunity to reflect on their literary experiences during their education, and this can explain the lack of comments on this issue.

## Analysis and discussion

The final revision of diaries showed that most trainees had apparently assimilated Esperanza's living experiences as theirs. This can be considered an empathic approach to literature, as shown in the following samples taken from the diaries.

*I don't know how old Marin is but I think everybody (specially when we are young) (...) have dreams. (Diary n. 3)*

In this case the reader uses «we» creating a communal experience with the characters in the book, and feeling identified with them in the fact that they have dreams.

*Poor Alice. There's nothing more disgusting that the thought of imagining mice in your house. (Diary n. 12)*

This sample shows that the student feels pity on different characters, and is trying to imagine himself/herself in the situation depicted in the book.

*I feel like Esperanza, I would like to have another name. (Diary n. 9)*

Here the reader feels close to the character in relation to a specific issue, that is, that they both do not like the name they have been given.

*This part of the book makes me happy because Esperanza gets two friends at last. (Diary n. 9).*

This is a good example up to what extent the reader can feel identified with the character, and even «feel» according to the book events and the character's achievement of happiness.

Curiously, some chapters arouse a higher interest of trainees, specially «My Name», and «The Clouds». The first elicited many trainees' comments because they were eager at explaining how their names had been chosen. Nevertheless, few trainees were successful at reflecting on the importance of the name of the protagonist. The aesthetic appreciation was limited to the interest of the topic. With regard to «The Clouds», this chapter deals with the situation of a group of friends laying on the ground, looking at the clouds and imagining the forms they could shape. Many trainees had also experienced the same situation and were glad to see it reflected in Esperanza's words.

On the contrary, trainees had irregular responses to some of the chapters. For example, some trainees avoided commenting on the one dedicated to the death of Esperanza's grandfather, while others dealt with the topic overtly, relating it to their living experiences. Especially remarkable it is the case of one student whose grandfather was at hospital at the time she was reading this chapter. She used the diary to say that she recognised her feelings in Esperanza's words, and that she could figure out how terrible the death of his grandfather would be for her.

Trainees mainly commented on topics, and they were interested in those chapters which reflected social issues, especially those who are the centre of attention in Spain nowadays. For example, women discrimination, or immigration, as it can be seen in the following diary excerpts.



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*Poor Sally. Imagine living with a man who is ordering and forbidding you all the day. It may be the hell. (Diary n. 10)*

*In Spain there are a lot of foreign people working to earn money to bring some members of their families here. (Diary n. 8)*

According to the data gathered, most comments were topic-based, and trainees tended to relate their own experiences to the ones showed in the book. Nevertheless, there are other aspects which were also relevant for trainees. Some trainees interpreted the text and expressed their likes and dislikes:

*I like this chapter. It shows how the girls are growing on Mango Street. They know that when your hips appear you are becoming in a woman, and that was their moment. (Diary n. 8)*

One student included a comment about using diaries for literary reflection. She was afraid of showing her feelings, thoughts, and this, once more, can be a good proof of the lack of personal contribution when dealing with literature in her last literary experiences.

*I would not like to become too sentimental on having done this diary, but it is what really I was feeling and remembering while I was reading this book. (Diary n. 7).*

Few comments referred to literary language. One student mentioned the beauty of metaphors and images in Cisneros' writing by saying that:

*It is really beautiful how she compares the smell of her mothers' hair with the smell of the bread, and how she says that with that smell she feels safe it is very beautiful too. (Diary n. 13).*

Another peculiarity of trainees' comments was that, in some cases, they imitated the style of the writer, using short and simple sentences with a strong visual component:

*Reading the second chapter I remembered a music box. It was of my cousin X, I liked it very much. It was red and it had a little doll inside, when you opened it, music sounded and the doll danced. (Diary n. 20).*

Images sometimes caused problems which were commented by the trainees. For example, in the following excerpt the student made reference to her inability to unlock the poetic language, and to know why the character talked to a tree:

*I don't understand why she talks to trees and feels understood by them. (Diary n. 19).*

In this case, the lecturer wrote down a response in her diary, trying to help the student by referring to another metaphor about trees which was related to this one. The metaphor came from a book by Isabel Allende, in which she compared herself with a tree which had been replanted in a different soil, but which still retained her mother-country earth in the roots. In this case, the teacher tried to play the role of mediator which pertains to an aesthetic oriented teaching practice. Nevertheless, it also became plain that trainees prefer to ask the lecturer to find out the «unique» and «valid» answer. This is how books seem to «work» in the classroom, that is, the teacher always has the correct interpretation, and the student is ready to accept it as it is.

## Conclusion

After analysing the data some important issues arouse. First, the task of dealing with a diary was difficult for many trainees,



maybe because it was the first time they used it while reading a book. Even so, if diaries are considered with regard to their individual progress, it becomes obvious that trainees develop a more aesthetic approach along time, as it has been previously stated, and that their comments are little by little more interesting, complex and elaborated than at the beginning of the diary. According to the analysis, trainees stop using summaries when they are given the chance to «dive» in the text and find elements (characters, situations, places, feelings) they feel related to.

Although in general trainees were able to find their own voice while reading, it is possible to state that the aesthetic level of their comments is very poor. Teacher trainees very often forgot to mention the book, and in many cases they were so enthusiastic in linking the text with their own life experiences, that the diary became a personal diary more than a reading diary. This may indicate the need for carrying out more guidance sessions where trainees may be reminded of the importance of reflecting with and on the book, and not «from» the book.

There are several aspects which could have been improved to make this study more fruitful, and that can be taken into account for future studies of this type. It would be advisable to reinforce the use of diaries with open discussion sessions in the classroom. As it has been mentioned before, it would also be useful to hold some guidance sessions on what an aesthetic response is, demonstrating that it is the reader who chooses his/her stance

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towards the text (see Rosenblatt, 2005: 10). In these sessions, it is necessary to clearly show the role of the teacher as facilitator and mediator and not as the giver of knowledge (see Delanoy, 1997).

Further research on this topic should try to gain insights about whether there is any correlation between age, gender and educational background and the quality of aesthetic responses. Another aspect to study could be if trainees face the same task of completing a literary diary more confidently after some guidance lessons in which the aesthetic stance is described and explained. The fact that students are less familiar with certain genres (see Fernández Fernández, 2005: 164) could also be the focus of a study which enquires about the type of stances teacher trainees have according to the literary genre used. It will also be interesting to see how the use of aesthetic strategies can be implemented in an EFL literature course, and what the results after a whole semester or year are in relation to trainees' views of reading and the quality and quantity of their learning. These trainees could be further researched by observing and analysing their teaching practices, and examining how their reading training may influence the way the use literary texts in their classrooms.

## Appendix

*While reading, have your diary at hand. Don't make summaries, reflect on the feelings and thoughts you have had while reading. How do you feel? Do situations in the book remind you of any aspect in your life? What are your opinions about what you are reading? Write from 2 to 4 pages at least once a week. It is NOT necessary to write after each chapter.*





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