

Teaching *Waiting for Godot* to Undergraduate Students of English Literature: A Reader-Response Approach

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Abstract This study investigates undergraduate students' perceptions about *Waiting for Godot* at a public sector university in Pakistan. The study explores how students' identification of the existentialist themes from the play is affected by pedagogical approaches and teachers' philosophy. Rosenblatt's (1938/1994) reader response and Sartre's (1956) existential framework have guided this study. The findings are based on data collected by semi-structured interviews from 15 participants. The study applies the qualitative mode of inquiry employing the thematic analysis method propounded by Braun and Clarke (2006). The key arguments based on findings reveal that participants' responses were affected at first, by their social and educational background. Participants connected existentialist themes that were very close to their life experiences and observations. Furthermore, study highlights the role of teachers in developing participants' understanding of the play. The results are useful for teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers as they bring some implications in the context of literary pedagogy.

Keywords Existentialism; Reader response; Literary Pedagogy; Undergraduate Students; *Waiting for Godot*.

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Introduction

The study has explored the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* at a public sector University in Pakistan. Students study this work as a part of their BS English Literature curriculum in almost all universities of Pakistan. At the research site where study was conducted the play was taught by a single teacher. The data was collected from the BS III literature students of varying socio-cultural background. In contrast to urban background, students from rural background have more stringent family systems where they strictly follow religious norms (Lloyd et al. 9). Hence they do not allow any kind of flexibility in the context of religion or their ethical and moral values. In addition, at public sector institutes students do not get exposed to such platforms where their critical thinking skills could be better polished (Andrabi et al. 2). Students' educational background and capabilities are therefore, different as they come from various private or public sector schools and colleges and also from rural or urban social backgrounds. Such socio-cultural factors hinder in promoting learners' autonomy in Pakistani universities (Hameed 1; Yasmin & Sohail 20). Moreover, in public sector universities, the teaching and learning process takes place in large classes.

Waiting for Godot is commonly interpreted in the context of existentialist thoughts. Correlating the basic principles of existentialist philosophy, it gives an impression about incomprehensibility, absurdity and resilience of the universe in which a man waits for divine help which never comes. While coming in contact with the play, students of Public Sector University discover a contrast between their beliefs and the themes in the play. This point of conflict alludes to complications regarding critical reading and interpretation of the text. Since it is a common practice to relate oneself to works of literature (Rosenblatt 02; Flynn 16), the current study has investigated perceptions of undergraduate students regarding meaninglessness and the conditions of human world as highlighted in the play. To

explore the perceptions of students, this study has followed frameworks of Sartre's Existentialist theory and Rosenblatt's Reader response theory.

Research Question

How undergraduate students' perceptions of the existentialist themes in *Waiting for Godot* are affected by the teaching strategies and teachers' philosophy?

Literature Review

Sartre's Model of Existentialism

Philosophers have been dealing with the problem of 'being' and 'existence' for ages. The world of art has been highly impacted by existential thoughts. Jean Paul Sartre (1956), one of the central figures of existentialist school of thought, took the traditional assumption, 'Essence precedes existence' and challenged the long tradition in philosophy that had always prioritized abstract, universal and impersonal essence over actual human existence. By conferring precedence to essence, Sartre completely denies the idea that there is some inherent meaning prior to existence. He claims that we create ourselves by our actions. Sartre holds the view, "At first [man] is nothing. Only afterwards he will be something and he himself will have made what he will be. Man, first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards" (526). It implies that man is what he makes of himself. Sartre rejects the notion that we are born with any inherent meaning or predetermined fate but rather humans are artisans of their own existence. There is no a prior human essence, model or blueprint that determines man.

The problem of 'Being' is the center of phenomenological exploration of Sartre. He discusses being-in-itself that refers to objects that are just there, having no awareness or value for themselves. It implies the being of things which are fixed like body, place of birth, historicity etc. but man is more than these fixed certainties. Man is not mere being-in-itself but also being-for-itself where man is a conscious subject, not in accordance with any definition, essence or generalization. He defines his own essence and gives meaning to his existence through the choices he makes. Man is always more than what he was, in a continuous restless urge to create his own meaning (Wild 45). These two aspects of being represent facticity and transcendence respectively. Sartre maintains that though the being of man is characterized by facticity, it nevertheless does not prevent us from being free and exercising our freedom. Sartre has encapsulated this idea as, "I am condemned to exist beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free" (439). It reflects that man's essence is never completely fixed

but he is yet to be. He gives meaning to his life by exercising and practicing his personal freedom, making choices and exercising freewill.

Waiting for Godot as an Existentialist Play

The notion of waiting and contesting one's decision to wait for a subtle hope that may change one's life has appealed audience throughout time. The selected play published after WWII and evokes provocative questions concerning the meaning of human existence. The philosophical pathways and entangled structure of the play have drawn multifarious research attention. Kern in her study maintains that there are Kierkegaardian echoes in Beckett's very assertion (8). Gilman points out that the play is closer to Camus' concept of the absurd as that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints (5). Many critics have labeled *Waiting for Godot* as an existentialist play in the more contemporary view of Sartre. Esslin notes the truly astonishing parallel between Sartre's existential philosophy and the creative intuition of Beckett, focusing on such facets as nothingness, freedom and the need of consistently creating ourselves in a succession of choices (19).

Critics have been divided over the topic. Since few maintain that the play has many religious undercurrents as Beckett concerns theological questions, dealing with the relation between God and mankind and waiting for salvation (Wang 14). He also commented that the play seems absurd but with a deep religious meaning. The text tries to explore the themes in four parts of God and man, breaking the agreement, repentance and imprecation and waiting for salvation. Loran interpreted *Waiting for Godot* in the light of Christian theology, propagating the idea that the play is embedded with the deep religious meaning where the waiting appears as a manifestation of the characters' unflinching hope in God (1). Stempel views the play as completely Christian, simplistically allegorical. He sketches the character of Estragon as representing the Jew who waits for the Messiah, making Godot a figure for the Messiah either way (2).

Many researchers repudiate the theological stance of the play and align Beckett with the skeptical thought of hope and waiting as a futile illusion. They leap an association with existential philosophy, a fitting undertone preoccupied with the meaning of human existence. In the MLA's guide to teaching the play, Williams (3) reflects that the play dramatizes elemental human experience to embody fundamental truths of the human condition as it construes meaninglessness of human existence through its unusual form. Different dimensions of the play: characters that are in absolute boredom of despondent life, the setting that only has the enigmatic road and a leafless tree, plot less narratives and the language that is devoid of content, all collectively and undoubtedly offer a shocking picture of the

painful realities of human life (Styan 16; Nealon 13). Kennedy further elaborates, “Wherever we look in Beckett’s play, we see images of spiritual loss and of human suffering and waste” (157). Play reveals the catastrophic, deplorable and apocalyptic human condition. It highlights the perplexing issues of hopelessness, meaninglessness, uncertainty, skepticism and anxiety that shackle and weaken one’s firm faith.

Rosenblatt’s Model of Reader Response Theory

Rosenblatt puts forward her Transactional Reader Response theory in which she gives importance to transaction between the text and the reader. Rosenblatt puts her idea as, “The text brings into the readers’ consciousness certain concepts, sensuous experiences and scenes. The special meanings and associations the words have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him” (31). It implies that transaction with textual elements and signs stimulate areas of consciousness where readers’ responses constitute reading. Literary texts bring some concepts, ideas or experiences that readers can easily relate to their own life experiences and observations. They identify themselves in characters or in the storyline. This may influence reading transaction.

Rosenblatt highlights the role of teachers in developing readers’ understanding of texts and offering literary responses. Beard comments that the process of reading and responding is like a triangle where learners’ role is on the inside and the teacher’s role is on the outside, bringing awareness, prompts and promotes the reader to make contextual links (9). Without teachers’ intervention, the response can be too narrow and restrictive. However, if students fail to have literary experience, it is the teachers’ role to construct a schema to increase their interest and involvement in the text so it should be enjoyed (Benton 20). Hence, it advocates a pedagogy that acknowledges the importance of individual responses. McGee also notes that with guided reading and discussing literature, students will call on their analytical thinking(3). Clifford also reflects that appropriating reader response theory requires a shift of emphasis from ‘analysis’ to ‘experience’ which in turn requires a balanced, harmonious pedagogy(3). Wherein, neither readers, nor texts are predominant. Thus, pedagogical approaches, instructors’ interpretation and interests also influence the readers’ personal responses to literary texts.

Relevant Empirical Studies Employing Reader Response Theory

Students’ literary interactions and levels of engagement in transactional process often depend on students’ textual understanding based on socio-cultural expectations. Schrijvers’ study examines the impact of literary education on students’ self and social perceptions. It aims to explore relationships between

students' learning experiences and teachers' classroom practices. Findings reveal that nearly all students reported to have learned something about themselves and others through literary works: mainly personal characterization of oneself and others, evaluation of people's behavior, life lessons and positive attitude towards literature. Skarstein's study has explored readers' literary experiences in Norwegian secondary schools. The results of the study reflected that the participants took the selected fictional texts as didactic tools for stimulating their critical thinking skills. Through their literary exploration, the participants entered into new contexts and discovered other perspectives than their own.

The themes of text allow readers to see themselves, access their own experiences as mirrored in the work where they closely engage with the text (Enciso 19; Rogers & Christian 7). Taiwanese students' responses to five American short stories were researched by Liaw. The findings revealed that students went beyond mere comprehension of the text and actively constructed meaning through transaction with the text because the themes were closer to their social realities. In the context of thematic closeness, Dutro presented third graders' experiences with a unit from their reading curriculum, *Hard Times* in which children made strong connections between the theme of family's economic hardships and their own lives and social context where their own poverty paralleled with the story. Cox and Many's study examined fifth grade children's written responses to selected works of realistic literature from reader response themes of stance and personal meaningfulness. The study, based on its findings also argued that participants focused more on the themes and events close to their own life experiences and social observation.

More recently, students' responses towards three young adult novels, included in UK school curriculum were researched by Syed. The study used literature circles and Google documents where students responded to social and personal issues such as death, inequality, racism, war and contemporary politics as presented through the medium of the selected literary texts. This study helped readers to have cross-national social interaction as the participants were from the UK and Norway. Thus, reader response approach pushes students to think beyond literary texts to deepen their thinking. The application of Iser's RRT on William Faulkner's *Rose for Emily* showed the effects of the reading experienced by the readers who came to the subjective opinions after reading (Khrais 1). Participants made personal judgments by endowing cultural setting in the novel with their social reality.

The reviewed literature reflects that there is a dearth of research on students' responses to literary texts, specifically in the context of Sindh, Pakistan. Thus, the

present study is an endeavor to fill the void in this context.

Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach in which the data is interpreted in descriptive form to present the major findings of the research. Qualitative research is the research that aims to understand, discover, and clarify perceptions, values, beliefs and feelings of the population. (Kumar 68). Furthermore, the study follows Creswell's five steps of qualitative data collection. Firstly, identifying research site and sample of the study; secondly, gaining access to site and participants through permission. Thirdly, prioritizing data according research questions fourthly, choosing instruments and designing protocols for data collection, and finally collecting data with focus on ethical issues.

The study relies on interviews as its data collection tool. Cohen et al. reflects, "Interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live and express how they regard the situation from their own point of view" (267). It shows that interview is helpful in understanding the point of views regarding any situation (Bryman 216). Keeping the demand of data collection in mind, researchers conducted in-depth interviews that allowed the participants to exchange in-depth perceptions regarding the matter. Semi-structured interviews were designed in which researchers did not pose pre-planned questions to validate all the information collected. Kallio et al.'s model of developing an interview schedule was followed.

Sampling was done according to Cohen et al.'s guidelines about considering size, access, and representativeness and sampling strategies. Data was collected from 15 participants who were undergraduate students of BS III English Literature at a public sector university. The number was kept small as the target was rich data not generalizability (Ritchie et al. 20). The targeted class was very large, thus participants were selected through purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, researchers choose selective participants to get an in-depth understanding of a small population (Creswell 217; Yin 20). The students were selected on the basis of their active class participation and involvement in discussion groups, specifically in the course of Drama. Participants had varied educational exposure and social backgrounds. Eight out of fifteen participants had urban background, whereas seven were from rural Sindh (See Table 1). Eight participants had exposure to private institutes whereas seven had exposure to public sector institutes. Out of 15, eight participants were female and seven were male. The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis model proposed by Braun and Clarke. This followed a

systematic process. Data was coded, code patterns were observed, and themes were designed and reviewed. The themes developed from the analysis are reported in the section of findings.

Codes	Female Participants	Male participants	Total No. of Participants
Rural background	04	03	07
Urban background	04	04	08
Private sector schooling	03	05	08
Public sector schooling	05	02	07

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants

Ethical issues were considered significant for this study. Data was collected ethically as suggested in methodological literature. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study. They were given informed consent forms explaining the project and assuring them of their voluntary and anonymous participation. Translation issues were also considered. Researchers realized the challenges of translation as it involves interpretation (Birbili 212; Temple and Young 22) and checked the work to ensure reliability of translations.

Findings

Participants’ Perceptions on Existentialist Themes as Reflected in the Play

Participants delve into multiple facets of the play on the theme of meaninglessness of human life. They viewed the play as capturing basic experience of being in the world. They reflected that the play has addressed human limitation, agonies, anxieties and state of helplessness. They identified the theme of meaninglessness through characters, plot setting and dialogues, further added by circular plot, setting of a barren road and a leafless tree, distractions of conversation and the act of characters’ waiting, all collectively reflect the given theme.

Participants viewed the theme of human freedom as characters were not exercising their freewill. Estragon and Vladimir were dependent on each other in power-relation. Similarly, Pozzo and Lucky were also confined to one another in power-relation. Thus, their over-dependence made them inactive. Participants reflected that the characters were lacking individuality. The element of ‘I’ was missing in them. The other major issue with them was their indecisiveness. They did not attempt to make any changes. They all were devoid of decision-making power. Though the characters could have opted to leave but they carried on with the choice of waiting. Their acts of waiting were making urgent demands of action.

Participants analyzed the theme of human responsibility as the characters were not accepting their responsibility. Participants quoted from the text, there was an instance when Estragon got his boot off, looked inside to see what was causing him the difficulty. There, Vladimir remarked, that was his own mistake that he was unable to remove the boot and was blaming the boot. Participants took this act as reflection of human tendency to blame external sources. The character was also blaming the boot for the pain in his foot. Participants further elaborated that characters were not accepting their responsibility. Their act of waiting and not accepting responsibility made them passive and stagnant.

Relating Existentialist Themes to Life Experiences and Social Observations

Participants exhibited personal involvement by having a sense of personal identification with characters of the *Waiting for Godot*. They related to characters' acts of meaningless by sharing that they all do wait and hope that things will come to them by themselves. Participants also elaborated that they all fall in the trap of waiting. It is not only about Estragon and Vladimir: it is about the entire mankind who helplessly, in different phases of their lives wait for someone that would take the lead of their lives. The situation of the tramps is an allegory of human condition.

Participants also contextualized the theme and responded experientially by recalling the tough phases of their lives. They discussed their own life experiences in relation to the theme. One female participant connected to the theme by expressing that characters' passiveness reminded her of her father's death. She shared that when her father died, she was like Estragon and Vladimir: alienated, undecided, passive, waiting and not knowing what to do. She was living meaninglessly without any aim as she felt the absence of her father. But then, her family made her realize that she has to live her life, to struggle and not to give up.

Relating the theme of human freedom, few participants exhibited personal relation to indecisive acts of the characters. Some participants shared their personal life experiences where the theme was relatable to their various phases of life as their inability of decision-making in various life aspects. They connected that often, they are also like the characters of novel, where they do not understand what is happening with their lives. Usually they do not struggle for life's meaning but invent a number of diversions to entertain them. They just create an impression that they exist. They also lack decision-making power like the characters. They connected to the theme by sharing that they also live in expectancy that hangs them upon tomorrow and loses today. Thus, the inability of the characters to make choices showcases as a catalyst for their own transformation: making choices, living life

and giving meaning that one chooses to give. The participants proclaimed that one must take their own journey to gain life's meaning rather than being indecisive and hoping for other sources. One male participant shared that the play reminded him of his pre-university days. The other participant shared that after experiencing failure in the medical field, she did not stop her struggle. She made the choice to pursue BS Degree in English Literature. She had plans, aspirations and desires and she put her efforts for those. Thus, while going through the play, she connected to the theme as if she had not made the choice at that time, her life would have been filled with meaninglessness. Hence, that is the power of making choices and taking decisions.

Some participants connected the theme to social observation by giving illustrations of political, religious, familial and societal norms. They illustrated that Lucky's enslavement by Pozzo is actually reflecting our enslavement to familial and social chains. We are also tied by a rope held by government, religious and social institutions. We also recycle others' ideas instead of creating our own. Further, participants connected characters' state of mind with theirs as characters were not realizing the purpose of their existence: participants also exhibited that they, sometimes involve themselves in disillusioning repetition of the daily routine and at the end, they blame that life has no meaning. But with the help of this play, they can draw on their experiences and gain sense of self-realization to accept their responsibility for the life they have. Participants also reflected that the play has filled them with a sense of curiosity about what the point of life is. They highlighted that the play explores the key issue of life's meaning: an outlook on life pursues the question of the meaning of one's life.

Role of Teaching Strategies

Participants' responses were affected by teaching strategy applied by the teacher. Few of the participants responded positively as they were helped to seek a vital personal experience in transaction with the play. They shared that the methods used to teach shaped their way of understanding, evaluation and responding to the text. They worked in groups where they were directed by the teacher to relate or to evaluate the given textual lines. Hence, in this way the teacher devised strategies which allowed students to draw personal relevance, access one another's experiences and participate more productively in the meaning-making process. This facilitated them to discover deep meaning from the play. They further elaborated that the teacher used to put them in different situations and posed various questions about the characters existential crisis. This activated their intellectual integrity and ability to express their independent judgment. They took teaching methods as appropriate where they were exposed to open up many avenues of exploration.

Four participants exhibited their dissatisfaction by sharing that pedagogical implications were not appropriate as their interest and willingness to engage with the text was not stimulated. Few participants denied having a personal engagement with the play. As one female participant remarked, “The class during the play was solely based on lecture method. I sensed myself completely out of touch and indifferent.” Participants recommended implementing various pedagogical approaches to help students interact with the texts. Participants’ responses also indicate that their textual understanding and literary experiences towards *Waiting for Godot* were influenced by the way teacher interpret the play. Majority of the participants reflected that when it comes to responses, their teacher was concerned more about learning academic responses rather than their own reflections. Teaching approach did not allow participants the freedom to express the meanings they had created while reading the play. One participant commented, “Teachers wanted us to see the same layers of meaning in the text that they had seen.” In this context, participants suggested that teacher should focus on how to express an interpretation rather than formulating one. They suggested that teacher should inspire a love of learning among students for better literary exploration and to develop their literary taste.

Discussion

Participants’ responses suggest that participants’ literary experiences with the play were affected by their educational and social environmental factors. Along with it teachers’ teaching tactics also affected students’ responses towards play. Rosenblatt states that readers construct their own meaning through bringing their individual experiences, social conventions, literary repertoires and contextual values while transacting with the text. After analyzing participants’ demographic information and their responses, it is argued that participants from urban background and private institutes were more critical and open in their discussion and reflected their deep textual understanding as compared to those who had rural background and had exposure to public sector institutes. Participants from urban background took the play served as a source of motivation, were more open in their discussion. In contrast to this, participants from rural background were indecisive in their responses and interpreted the play in the context of their religious beliefs took existentialist philosophy as anti-religious. They exhibited that this philosophy is actually posing hard questions about one’s existence that enhances skepticism and stimulates obsession with the idea of nothingness. Hassan & Hassan’s study of students’ perception about literature also brings forth rural and urban divide in

English classrooms. They claim that urban students with exposure, freedom and English language proficiency in comparison to rural students are expressive, open and interpret the literature in multiple ways. Thus, participants' familial background, educational exposure and social environment were important in informing their interpretations. Rosenblatt also supports this argument that a reader brings personality traits, his contextual ideas, preoccupations and many other elements that determine his response to the peculiar contribution of the text (4).

Teaching strategy was also one of the main response- affecting factor that helped students to seek a vital personal experience. The reviewed literature also highlights the role of teachers in developing readers' understanding of texts and offering literary responses. It can be interpreted that responses of participants reflect the role of teacher as a great factor in navigating their literary experiences with the play. Teachers' compliance to teaching techniques that are reader response in nature results in academic excellence of students. As Junejo & Shaikh (01) state that teacher who asks open ended and contextual questions and invite students to come up with their personal interpretation, his classes are engaging and fun filled in comparison to the teacher who strictly focuses on literary themes, symbolism, characterization with close ended and textual question. Thus the students' interest is generated not only by the text but also by a teacher. Similarly, data of the current study indicates that a literature classroom can be interesting when students are encouraged to discuss their personal interpretation of literary text. Therefore, study suggests, teachers' training and academic excellence affect the degree to which a literature class can be interesting and engaging. So, it is necessary that teachers should be aware of reader response methods and the ways of its application in the classroom. The interactive environment created by the teachers fosters students' ability to articulate their reading and literary experiences.

Participants' responses also reflect the way teacher approached the play and influenced participants' understanding. Participants recommended that since the play touches very sensitive issues, a teacher needs to be neutral and impartial while teaching the play. This relates to Young's views that by removing any partial position from the teacher, the readers can respond freely in their own autonomous ways. This can be interpreted that in our social context and educational culture, teachers occupy a dominant position in classrooms. In most of traditional teaching, teachers do not allow students to speak up their thoughts and ideas. What teachers deliver and how teachers interpret literary texts, students formulate the same interpretations. Hence, it affects students' own creative interpretations related to literature. Participants' responses towards teaching strategies and teachers' ways of interpreting the play

suggest that readers' responses and the role of teacher in guiding that response can be a dynamic rewarding experience if pitched appropriately.

The results indicate that reading literary texts can be optimized through aesthetic stance. Such evocation generates diversity of responses among learners. If students become personally involved with literary texts, they would be more likely to attain cognitive and affective goals. It provides a signboard for articulation of readers' personal responses to the world.

Conclusion

The study reveals that participants' responses towards existentialist themes were affected by pedagogical approaches and instructors' interpretations of the play. Recognizing the limitations of the study, it explores importance in further developing this area of research to incorporate students' responses to literary texts. The participants consisted of an age group that ranged 19-22. Future research can also be done on postgraduate students to check if age also serves as a response affecting factor. This study has focused on a single play. Research scope on the same area can be further extended to highlight perceptions of students to other literary works and reader-response application in literature classes.

The findings have brought some implications in the context of literary pedagogy. It is suggested that teachers should encourage students to interact with the text and draw individual responses. Teaching strategies should be devised in a way that moves readers towards critical appreciation of the text. It should allow students to access each other's experiences and participate more productively in meaning-making process. It also recommends that teaching should focus on how to express an interpretation rather than formulating one. Participants' responses also signal for curriculum designers. The results indicate that learners' active engagement with literary texts depend on thematic relevance of the work. Hence, it is recommended that curriculum designers should focus on the works that are thematically relatable to readers' experiences and observation. Thus, to strengthen learners' connection with literary texts, works should be selected having consideration over the themes and contextual proximity.

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