

Conveying an Author's Intention to EFL Readers: The Meaning of "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

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The present study examines whether an author of a poem's intention in writing the poem is successfully conveyed to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) readers. It also investigates how students' English proficiency influences their ability to comprehend the poem. The study was conducted with twenty-one participants who attended a literary class named Literary Criticism. The twenty-one students who analysed the meaning of poetry were represented by student one and other students (S1-S3) in every line of the stanza of the poetry. that author of the poetry was successful in conveying their meaning to the readers of EFL, which is shown by the results of students' work through the reader-response approach and stylistic approach. Student one and others (S1 up to S3) could find the meaning in every of poetry by analysing either literal words or similes and metaphorical words composed in "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. Hence, the readers (students of EFL) could enhance their abilities and comprehension of the poem. The pedagogical implication for future research is that authors and readers of the poem both need logical critical thinking as well as skills or abilities to convey and receive the meaning of poetry.

Key words: *Poem, The author's intention, Reader-response, Students' feedback.*

Introduction

Poetry is defined as a salve for troubled times and a comfort medium that examines and explores the world (Williams, 2011 & Leech, 1969). It possesses a different form from prose

and drama. The text is compact, and it does not belong to any narrative text. Therefore, poetry does not have a story in a literary sense. Roberts & Jacobs (2004) state that poetry is unique, since by nature it uses words with the utmost economy; the words of poetry create rhythm, rhyme, meter, and form. They add that for these reasons, each poet (the author of a poem) seeks perfect and indispensable words that convey all the compressed meanings, overtones, and emotions that each poem requires and also words that sound beautiful and proper (Satinem & Juwati, 2019). In addition, poetry must also be able to provide persuasion to readers like speakers who must master ethos, pathos, and logos (Noermanzah et al., 2019). A good poem must also have a choice of words that form not only coherent and beautiful lines but also add politeness to language. It must use variations of words that reflect the author's intention (Syafryadin et al., 2020).

Glencoe (2010) distinguished poetry from prose. According to him, prose has a relatively simple structure, since it only compounds proper sentences grouped into paragraphs. Poetry, on the other hand, has a structure that offers many more possibilities to explore. This is in accordance with the writer's explanation as aforementioned. Moreover, Glencoe (2010) explains that poetry has structure as follows: imagery, figurative language, rhythm, rhyme, and a speaker that becomes the voice that talks to the reader, as a narrator does in a prose, or dialogue in drama.

Poems seem to be more enjoyable to read as entertainment rather than as literary works. The special syntax, imagery, and figurative language contained in poems attract readers as they are quite different from those in other literary genres, such as prose and drama. Poetic devices in poems, such as patterns, rhymes, verses, lines, etc., distinguish poems from other genres (Satinem et al., 2002).

Imagery in a poem is the descriptive language that appeals to the five senses. The purpose of using imagery in a poem is to arouse the reader's imagination. The description in a poem must be able to give an idea of the choice of words presented so that they have useful value in life (Karto et al., 2019). Imagery uses concrete things, along with its purpose to arouse one's imagination. An example of imagery in a poem is "a red rose" in the poem "Red, Red Rose", written by Robert Frost. As with other forms of literature, poetry concerns real life. According to Glencoe (2010), there are two ways that a reader analyses a poem. One of the ways is that he/she analyses it by analysing the poetic devices of the poem; the other way is that he/she analyses the poem based on its content. As previously explained, poetry belongs to a genre of literature.

The special form of poems makes it possible to study them through various approaches. These include the reader-response approach and stylistic approach, as suggested by Kellem (2009). The stylistic approach is usually used to analyse the language forms of the text. When

one wants to analyse a poem's content, one should approach the poem from a reader-response perspective. The reader-response approach concerns the reader's interaction with the text. Poems are interesting reading for students.

According to Rosenblatt (1978), reading is also an event that involves a nonlinear transaction between the text and the reader. Meaning is not created by a preconceived interpretation of the text but by the unique individual whose emotions, background, and ideas create meaning during a particular time and setting (Kellen, 2009). In the context of teaching literature to EFL students, this means that when students read a literary work, they are making a transaction with the text as the readers. As aforementioned, Rosenblatt (1988) suggested transactional theory, which became the root for the reader-response theory. She emphasised that the activities of reading and writing share a necessary involvement with text.

In analysing literary works, there are many approaches to be used. Literary approaches include six approaches reviewed by Van (2009), namely the new criticism approach, structuralism approach, stylistic approach, reader-response approach, language-based approach, and critical literacy approach. There are other approaches to literary analysis in a broader context, namely the historical approach, philosophical approach, formalism approach, psychological approach, feminist approach, Marxist approach, and cultural approach.

Literary works are different to other kinds of writings, such as news and factual texts like manual books, etc. Reading literary works involves the ability to think critically in order to understand what authors intend to convey through their works. In other words, readers need to be able to find implied meanings beyond stated ones. Analysing literary works fulfils one of the purposes of teaching literature to EFL students, which is that teaching literature to the students encourages their critical thinking about plots, themes, characters, and so on. Kohl (2000) indicates that the core image in a poem is chosen to build up an emotional rhythm that can be conveyed by simply telling the reader what they think and feel about that poem. This is different to the view of Spiegelman (2005) who states that poetry impresses its own intelligence on the reader. This means that poetry does not vulgarly proclaim what its content or context describes.

In the current research, the writers believe that the reader-response approach is the most suitable approach to apply to literary works by using Gibbs' reflective cycle. This approach to literary analysis encourages students to draw on their personal experiences, opinions, and feelings in their interpretation of literature, as described by Van (2009). In the context of teaching literature to EFL students, much research has implemented the reader-response approach to literary analysis as an output in literature classes.

In the current study, the writers are keen to discuss how the author's intention in writing the poem is conveyed to EFL students. The writers would like to find out if the intention of the poet (the author of poems) is successfully conveyed to the readers, considering they are non-native English speakers. The writers believe that the reader-response approach can accommodate their desires, since it encourages the students to relate and respond to the poem personally. The writers also intend to find out if language proficiency plays a role in the students' inability to comprehend the author's intended meaning in the poem. Considering these purposes, the writers formulated two research questions as follows: Is the author's intention in writing the poem successfully conveyed to the readers? How does the students' English proficiency influence their ability to comprehend the poem?

Research Methods

This study uses the reader response method to determine students' understanding of the poem "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost and find out how much influence their English language abilities have on their understanding of the poem. This study examined whether the author's intention in writing the poem is successfully conveyed to the readers. Document analyses of the students' writing artefacts were employed in this qualitative study. The students' writing was their feedback on the poem. The writers chose the poem considering it was a simple poem that used simple language. Therefore, the writers believed that the poem was quite comprehensible for the students who were previously exposed to literature in the Introduction to Literature subject class.

The study was conducted with twenty-one students enrolled in Introduction to Literature. One poem entitled "The Road Not Taken" and the students' written feedback about the poem were analysed to examine whether the students were able catch the author of the poem's true intention in composing the poem, and to find out how the students' English proficiency influenced their ability to comprehend the poem.

The data analysis technique in this study involved qualitative content analysis by giving an interpretation of the data determined by the unit of analysis based on the research problem category, then making contextual conclusions. Testing of the validity of the data was done using a member check, expert validity test, and using inter rater.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

An overview of approaches that can be applied by students in responding to poems has been elaborated on previously. The methodology for conducting the study has also been stated. In

this section of the study, the writers present the findings of the current study. The students were assigned to read the poem and write down their thoughts and understanding of the poem.

In order to enable the students to think deeply about the poem, the authors provided several discussion questions about the poem. Through the questions, the students were led to think critically about the poem, not merely read and find the poem's poetic devices. The discussion questions are as follows:

What human traits are suggested by the first stanza of the poem?

What is the theme of the poem?

In what way does the poem suggest that Frost was a non-conformist?

Do you think the line "Yet knowing how way leads on to way" is fatalistic in tone? Explain your answer (Curry, 2005).

The following is an extract that was made by a student (henceforth, this student will be referred to as S1).

In the first stanza, the author talks about the situation when he is faced with two different paths in the wood. The season may be autumn, because he says "yellow wood". Perhaps the leaves have changed to yellow. He talks about his confusion in choosing one of them. He stands for a long time, thinks hard and tries to make the best decision. He is very confused, because he doubts whether he should choose one path. He doesn't know how good the one path is and how bad it is. He is afraid he will make the wrong decision.

This poem talks about the difficult situation when humans are faced with choices and should choose one of them that feels good or better for her or himself. This situation will make everyone hesitate about their feelings regarding whether something is a bad or good decision. It becomes difficult for everyone to face choices, because we cannot predict the future. We cannot predict whether a choice will have a good or bad impact. Sometimes people even want to choose both to avoid regret at the end. But this is impossible. We should choose one choice and make the best decision.

The theme of the poem is about "making decisions" or "making choices. From the first line to the end of the stanza, the poem talks about making the decision and how it is difficult, hard, confusing, and how one may choose the wrong way.

Frost was a non-conformist; we can see this in the last stanza in line 4: "I took the one less travelled". This refers to the road or choice that would not normally be taken by travellers; instead of conforming to the norm, or the standard, he makes a non-conformist choice and it

seems that it was the right one. It is imagined that Frost finds this path more interesting than the other.

Yes, I think that it is fatalistic in tone, because before its words, he tries to cheer himself to be sure. But after that, he really sure that he didn't has a power to making sure himself. He really wonders and worries about his decision.

The following shows the response to the poem made by another student, who will henceforth be referred to as Student 2 (S2):

1. It shows the trait of being confused. The first stanza talks about someone who is faced with two different paths. The author must choose one of the two paths because they cannot possibly trace both paths at the same time. When he has chosen one of those paths, he will not be able to return. Therefore, he must be wise in making his choices.
2. It involves making choices or the choices someone makes in their life.
3. The author said that "he took the one less travelled by". This means that he chose a wrong choice or a choice that would not normally be taken by travellers. I think he makes a non-conformist choice and it seems that it was the right one.
4. I think the line "Yet knowing how way leads on to way" is not fatalistic. This is because the author knows how "way leads on to way" – how one road can lead to another. He realises that all decisions that have been made cannot return to normal, but sometimes our decisions lead us to other decisions and others. Hence, we can always come back differently. Remember all decisions must have a risk, and we must take risks in whatever choices we make after carefully considering them.

Another student, henceforth referred to as S3, responded to the short story as follows: In his journey, the author discovers that there are two different roads in a yellow wood. At that moment, he must decide which road he will go through. It was impossible for him to go through both roads at once. After considering all the possibilities, he finally chooses to use one of the roads that will lead him to the next journey.

The human traits in the first stanza imply that in life, we find different visions, minds, and styles. Everything has two sides (like black and white, day and night, negative and positive, high and low, etc). We realise that the everything ends up depends on our best choices. If we don't know what the best choice is, which one must we make? In the end, the only thing you can do is regret everything. Your life becomes screwed up because of yourself. Choose your own road that reflects who you really are.

When you just choose something randomly without deep thought and making the best decision, you just lead yourself into a cave. The more you walk without a turnaround, the



more you lose your way. To avoid this problem, it would be nice if we reflect carefully on what our purpose in life is because YOLO (you only live once). The options revealed mean that we must choose carefully. This is the first step and it will be our future.

A conformist is a person who usually does things differently from the majority of people, not for the sake of being different and special, but because they prefer to do so. In the second stanza, in the line "Because it was grassy and wanted wear", the author tries to choose a road in a yellow wood, a road that is rarely travelled by people. In real life, when we are bored because we are following trends and everyone looks the same, we want to become unique or different people. But in the third stanza, in the line "I doubted if I should ever come back" the author suggests that we should become non-conformist. This is because people are used to following trends, so becoming different takes great courage. For instance, when one wears different clothes, some people will stare and cause shame. Therefore, it is easier for us if we follow the majority's trends.

Do you think the line, "Yet knowing how way leads on to way" is fatalistic in tone? Explain your answer.

Yes, I do. Fatalistic is knowing that you are screwed and there is nothing you can do about it. Because the author is conscious that his decision will be wrong, changing it is hard. The road he takes becomes a boomerang for himself. At this stage, the other road is not necessarily good for him.

The second purpose of this study was to find out whether the author of the poem's intention was successfully conveyed to the readers. Before analysing the students' extracted response writings, the writers believe it is necessary to present the poem and elaborate what the author intends to convey in his poem, based on the writers' own interpretations.

After analysing the students' responses to the poem entitled "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost, the writers noticed that generally the students caught the true intention.

The following is the full text of the poem:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The writers have previously discussed two approaches to analysing poems. The former was concerned with the poetic devices used in the poem (the stylistic approach), while the latter was concerned with the meaning of the poem and the interaction between the reader and the poem (the reader-response approach). Since the present study is concerned with the content, the writers assert that it is unnecessary to discuss the poetic devices and the language in the poem. Instead, the writers discuss the author's true intention in writing the poem through the reader-response approach. Nenadica et al., (2018), state that expert responses form complex factor structures of subjective experience in poetry. Experts and non-expert readers of poetry have different viewpoints in conveying the meaning of a poem. O'Halloran (2019) creates a filmed poem to induce a response from university students that interprets the meaning of poetry. O'Halloran (2019) used another approach to convey readers' responses with Nenadica et al., (2018).

In this study, the researchers found that by using stylistic analysis to interpret the meaning of poetry, the readers have different viewpoints. They could give natural responses based on what they felt and thought about every single stanza of "The Road Not Taken". This aligns with what was found by O'Halloran (2019) regarding stylistic analysis that can be used together with a poem film in many countries in the world. It could enhance and extend students' capacities in creating natural thinking. Furthermore, the other researchers also identified how the readers interpret poetry's meaning based on grammatical composition in every line of the stanzas.

Researchers such as Blohma et al. studied sentences, judgments and grammar of poetry in German. They found that readers changed the impact of the order of words and rhythm patterns in poetic verses as well as their syntactic and prosodic nature with consistent intuition in regular poetic sentences (2018). The present research also found that the words used to compose the lines of poetry by the author are metaphorical. The use of similes or metaphorical words are part of the character of poetry. This was shown by S1.

The word or phrase “yellow wood” no means wood with yellow colour, but an expression of the author about the life he passed which seems to be hardly darkness in making final decision, what should and could be chosen or done by himself. In this case, the readers, particularly S1, could convey the meaning and deliver it. This is accordance with Tartakovsky & Shen’s (2019) argument that similes as well as metaphorical words in poetry or other literature works push the reader to think outside of the content of what the author wrote or said in their poem.

Discussion

Before discussing the results of the students’ understanding of the poem and finding the author’s intention in the poem, the writers find it necessary to give a brief explanation of the content of the poem, give a simple description of what the poem is about and mention what the author intended to say through his work. Analysing a poem based on content is not as simple as analysing it for its poetic devices. In order to simplify the analysis for beginners, analysing the content can be done by determining some aspects. This regards the total meaning of the poem. The total meaning consists of the subject, feeling, tone, and intention. Subject in poetry analysis means determining who is being talked about in the story. It can be a person or a group of people, things, events, and so on. Subject means the thing being talked about in the poem. Feeling in poetry analysis means the author’s feelings towards the subject. In terms of the feeling, readers may find out or feel how the author feels towards the subject. Tone means the feelings that the poem brings to the readers. This is how readers feel when they read the poem. Intention regards the research questions of the present study. Intention is the purpose that the poet conveys by writing his/her poem.

By following the pattern of total meaning, the writers interpreted the poem being discussed in the present study. The poem is entitled “The Road Not Taken”, written by Robert Frost. In the first line of the poem, it is found that the subject of this poem is “the two diverged road”. Literary works represent something to be revealed that is concealed by symbols. “Road” cannot be interpreted in literal ways; it must have some “other” meaning. Thus, the road in the poem is understood as a “choice”, and “the two diverged road” means two choices. Regarding the subject, the entire poem talks about “the road” or choice, so the subject of the study is the road. The feeling of the poem is confusion. Remember that previously the author

mentioned the two diverged road. The next line shows that in order to move on, he needed to choose between two choices. Making the decision is not an easy thing, since he does not know what is there ahead of him on each road that he can choose. The tone of the poem means the feelings it brings to the readers when they read the poem. From the way the author arranged his words in the poem, the writers could say that the tone is kind of sad, sympathetic, and pitiful.

The intention of the poem is to show to the readers that in life as humans, they will be faced with choices in everything. The author wanted to say that people need to be wise and open minded to choose, since once they have chosen, they cannot go back. In the poem, it was said that age, or time, cannot be turned back. In the end, readers might find that the author turned out to choose the road that people do not normally choose. Relating to Rosenblatt (1978), reading is also an event that involves a nonlinear transaction between the text and the reader; meaning is not created by a preconceived interpretation of the text but by the unique individual, whose emotions, background, and ideas create meaning during a particular time and setting (Kellen, 2009). This determines the total meaning of the poem. It can be found in the text of the poem by reading and making a transaction between the text and the reader.

In answering the question prompts designed for the students, as mentioned previously, the writers would like to interpret the poem so that it can help in explaining whether the author's intention in writing the poem is successfully conveyed to the EFL readers. The first prompt says, "What human traits are suggested by the first stanza of the poem?" After examining the poem, it can be concluded that the human trait of the subject, as suggested in the first stanza of the poem, is wisdom. The subject is a wise man. He considers the two options by recalling the consequences of taking each choice. The second prompt says, "What is the theme of the poem?" After examining the poem, it can be concluded that the theme of the poem is that everyone will have choices in life. In making decisions, he/she must think first about the consequences, since he/she can never come back. People cannot return to their former age and they cannot rewind time. In answering the question "In what way does the poem suggest that Frost was a non-conformist?", we can see in the poem that the author told the readers that "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.". Frost chose the road not taken often, which means the choice that people will not normally choose. Thus, it can be assumed that Frost is a non-conformist. As for the question that says, "Do you think the line 'Yet knowing how way leads on to way' is fatalistic in tone?", the answer will depend on the readers.

Conclusion

In the present paper about conveying the author's intention to EFL readers, it can be concluded that the author of poetry has successfully conveyed meaning to EFL readers. This



is shown by the results of students' work through the reader-response approach and stylistic approach. Students S1 up to S3 could find the meaning in every line of the stanzas in the poetry by analysing either literal words or similes and metaphorical words composing the poetry". The readers could enhance their ability and comprehension of the poem.

Suggestion for Further Research

This study has explored students' comprehension of the poem entitled "The Road Not Taken, written by Robert Frost. It attempted to see if the author's true intention.



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