Graded Readers: The Importance of Using Stylistic Devices to Maximise Language Learners' Aesthetic Reading

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ABSTRACT

It is important to produce graded readers (GRs) that appeal to language learners in order to encourage Extensive Reading (ER). Day and Bamford (1998) postulate that a good piece of text must be able to communicate with its readers. This is in line with Rosenblatt's (1978) premise that the evocation in the reader, that is the experience of the reader with the text, is what marks successful communication, and is what positions the reader on the aesthetic stance during the reading encounter. This means successful learner material must be able to communicate with the second language (L2) reader with affect for the reader to enjoy the reading journey. Publishers often focus on the element of a good story to create an aesthetic reading experience. Whilst a good story or content is usually the main element in bringing about a text-reader transaction, "form" or the way content is expressed cannot be evicted from its role in evoking pleasure. Miall and Kuiken (2002), in their foregrounding theory, state that readers will be able to derive pleasure from their engagement with stylistic devices. Studies have shown that readers are able to respond to foregrounding regardless of their characteristics. Since GRs have the primary aim of bringing enjoyment to the language learner (Bassett, 2015), it is important to create texts that are capable of maximising the learners' aesthetic response, and this includes taking into consideration the role of form. This paper, therefore, aims to highlight the importance of using stylistic devices in GRs.

Keywords: aesthetic stance, aesthetic reading theories, foregrounding theory, graded readers, reader response

INTRODUCTION

Graded readers (GRs), or language learner literature (LLL), are simplified reading materials with laddered levels of language difficulty specially written for language learners. They are mainly used for Extensive Reading (ER) in the English as Foreign Language (EFL)/English as Second Language (ESL) context with the aim of getting students to read and enjoy English language material (Day, 2015). In ER, reading is fast and plentiful; as such, it is engined by pleasure. Bassett (2015) puts it aptly when she says GRs have the purpose of charming the learner with storytelling, so that the learner is urged to turn the page and to want to read more stories. It is therefore essential that GRs be appealing to learners, especially when this community of learners are likely to be slow, reluctant readers, without confidence and with limited linguistic capacity (Bassett, 2015).

The question of what makes good GRs then arises. Day and Bamford (1998) believe that what makes a piece of writing successful is in its ability to communicate with its audience. Material for language learners, therefore, must be authentic and linguistically simple.

Claridge (2011), in her investigation, found that publishers and language learners generally are united in their opinions of the importance of a good story. In fact, a good story has been hailed as the number one factor in producing a good read (Waring, 2003; Claridge, 2011; Bassett, 2015). Readability or comprehensibility is another aspect that contributes to the perception of a good read (Day & Bamford, 1998; Waring, 2003; Bassett, 2015). The appropriate linguistic level of a material is considered a major motivating factor in second language reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). The importance of readability is reflected in the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) guidelines for judges of the Language Learner Literature Award (LLL Award) with the criterion listed second after "interest of theme or topic". How well a text complies with its level is stressed in italics under this criterion in the judges' template, further signifying its importance. Another crucial criterion is the quality of writing (Day & Bamford, 1998; Bassett, 2015). This is also reflected in the judges' template of the LLL Award. However, no description is provided in the template for what constitutes this criterion. This lack of description for "quality" denotes the subjectivity of the criterion, and is therefore deemed left to the interpretation of the judges. A survey of the judges' comments on award-winning books from 2014 to 2016, which were procured from the ERF website, reflects the criterion of "quality of writing" as writing that is authentic, natural, descriptive, in-depth and simple. Claridge (2011) interprets this criterion as having literary quality, reflecting Day and Bamford's (1998) view that to communicate with impact and affect involves literary or poetic language, or language that reflects art or beauty.

It is without a doubt that a good story written in simple, linguistically appropriate language makes good material for language learners. However, what remains elusive is what is considered as good quality writing that will appeal to learners. If good quality writing reflects authentic language which does not economise on literary language, and yet does not compromise on readability, the issue of whether the use of literary language will contribute to good GRs arises.

AESTHETIC READING THEORIES

Rosenblatt (1978) theorises that successful communication with the reader takes place when there is a transaction between the text and the reader. The ability of a text to evoke the reader is what makes a text literary and successful in its communication. To repeat, Day and Bamford (1998) have stated that successful learner material communicates with its audience. According to Rosenblatt (1978), evocation causes the reader to experience the text aesthetically. It is the aesthetic state that propels the reader to continue reading, and not the curiosity of the content alone. Rosenblatt (1978) terms the pleasurable stance taken by the reader "aesthetic", as opposed to "efferent", which embodies reading solely for information, which does not engage pleasurable emotions. She posits that "aesthetic reading, by its very nature, has an intrinsic purpose, the desire to have a pleasurable, interesting experience for its own sake" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p.275). This is in line with the aim of GRs, as asserted by Bassett (2015).

In aesthetic reading, the reader's world experiences play the primary role in evoking emotions by creating a personal meaning of the text, such as when the reader transacts with the elements of the story or characters. However, the linguistic strand complements the act of transaction. Assuming the aesthetic stance, the reader is provoked by the words, which are constructed by the use of stylistic devices (Rosenblatt, 1978). The provocation of the words causes the reader to sense and feel and imagine, and to connect the words to his ideas

(Rosenblatt 1978, 1982, 1988). This means the words are the stimulus for an aesthetic reading experience.

Rosenblatt (1978) makes it clear that content or a good story per se cannot guarantee transaction, and that the use of stylistic and formal devices is one way to alert the reader to adopt the aesthetic stance. She uses children's response to illustrate the role of words in a reader-text transaction: "They delightedly sway to the sound and rhythm of words" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p.272). She opines that it is the transaction with the words that allow them to live through an aesthetic experience of being able to "see and hear and feel" since they have limited cognitive strategies (p.272). It is thus important for the writer to "select significant images that will stimulate his reader to undertake the process of sensuous and intellectual recreation. The greater the reader's ability to respond to the stimulus of the word, the greater his capacity to savour all the words can signify of rhythm, sound, and image…" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.49). Soter et al. (2010) who delineate Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance into "expressive response" (private response that is evoked by content) and "aesthetic response" (response that is evoked by form or words in the text), arrive at the conclusion that the features of an aesthetic response are grounded in the art of the work which transpires an engagement, and not sparked by one's personal experience, of which if they are, will be considered as "expressive response".

Although Rosenblatt (1978) developed her transactional theory by taking into consideration only first language readers, her theory has been applied to L2/EFL studies (Iskhak, 2015). Claridge (2011), one of the researchers who employs Rosenblatt's theory in her study of her EFL subjects, submits that L1 and L2 readers create evocations of texts in the same manner. Although their linguistic proficiency differs, it would raise no issue if the linguistic level of the text corresponds with the readers'.

Another theory that supports aesthetic reading is the foregrounding theory by Miall and Kuiken (2002). Research work has found that devices used in foregrounding, that is an act of expression or art, enhance the potential of meaning, and as such give the reader a possible aesthetic experience, made possible by slowing down the reader, which in turn increases feelings towards the text (Van Peer and Hakemulder, 2006). Shklovsky (1998, p.18) remarks that art created through literary or stylistic devices "exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" and "the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged", and that stylistic devices help an expression to achieve greater emotional effect (Miall and Kuiken 1994, p.391).

Miall and Kuiken (2002, p. 224) state that "readers can take pleasure in the aesthetic feelings that arise from their engagement with formal features of literary texts". "Feeling", according to Kuiken et al. (2004, p.174), refers to "the bodily sense, within awareness … including emotions, moods, and attitudes" which occur during reading.

Relying on the foregrounding theory, Miall and Kuiken (2002) identified four domains of feelings that occur during reading response, one of which is aesthetic feelings. The domain of "aesthetic feelings" encompasses generic, narrative or stylistic components, but for the purpose of aligning it to the notion of aesthetic as delineated by Soter et al. (2010), only the feelings evoked by stylistic elements are considered. Miall and Kuiken (2002) describe the feelings evoked by stylistic devices as "heightened interest". They construe that these feelings are parallel to Kneepkens and Zwaan's (1994) "artefact emotions" or A-emotions, which are the first phase of mental representation of the text that the readers construct. This first phase is in response to the surface structure or the wording of the text, such as the grammatical aspects and rhetorical devices. It does not take into consideration the interpretation.

A literature survey shows that Miall and Kuiken (1994, 1995, 2002) and Kuiken et al. (2004) described various feelings during aesthetic reading with words as highlighted in the following table:

Examples of types of feelings	Source of keywords
struck *pleasure* from *engagement* with formal features *heightened interest*, i.e. *capture* and *hold* their interest *captured*, *held* in response to foregrounding … *diffusely heightened feeling tone* *appreciation* of the formal aspects	Miall and Kuiken (2002, pp.223-225)
strike, capture *arouses* feelings *interesting*	Miall and Kuiken (1994, pp.392-394)
evoke … images and feelings	Miall and Kuiken (1994, p.392)
feeling, sound, smell, hear, see, touch, vivid	Miall and Kuiken's LRQ (Literary Response Questionnaire) (1995, pp.55-56)
captured by the rhythm of a verse *intrigued* by an ironic description	Kuiken et al. (2004, p.175)

Table1: Words used to describe aesthetic feelings

Taking into account feelings in aesthetic reading is crucially pertinent considering that Rosenblatt (1978) acknowledges the role of stylistic devices in evoking feelings. She ubiquitously uses the words "feel" and "sense" in describing the aesthetic stance and dapples her discussion of the stance with words such as "feelings", "absorbed", "sensations", "emotions", "pleasure", "imagination" and "attitude". Aesthetic or pleasurable reading is, therefore, concerned with the feelings that arise from the reader-text transaction.

EVIDENCE OF LEARNERS HAVING THE CAPACITY TO RESPOND AESTHETICALLY TOWARDS LITERARY LANGUAGE

Miall and Kuiken (1994) found that foregrounding is capable of evoking affect regardless of the readers' literary competence, background or interest. This means readers with little literary knowledge or experiences are equally capable of experiencing heightened emotions when encountering stylistic devices. Studies by Van Peer et al. (2007) and Miall (2006) arrived at the same conclusion that reaction to foregrounding is independent of readers' characteristics. This dismisses pedagogical implications which suggest otherwise (Becker, 1999, p.123). The logic of these findings is nailed by Soter et al. (2010, p.206) when they surmise that the readers "are experiencers of the text but relatively unaware of what is playing into that experience". This means the readers' ability to respond to literary language

is not to be confused with the ability of the readers to identify foregrounding features, which will require linguistic competence (Miall, 2006). Even so, in Khairul's (2016) study of L2 Malaysian students, she found that the learners are capable of both identifying and responding aesthetically to foregrounding elements in texts.

Nevertheless, in an investigation by Dixon et al. (1993), they did find a correlation between literary effects and the readers' reading experience (cited by Van Peer et al., 2007, p.203). In this scenario, we cannot but admit, using common sense, the indicative role of reading experience in creating literary effects. However, the effects should be a matter of extent since literary effects should co-vary with the readers' reading experience.

Despite the numerous studies done on the relationship between foregrounding and readers' aesthetic response, there has been no known direct investigation on learners' response to foregrounding or stylistic devices. Studies of learners' aesthetic response usually focus on pedagogical techniques of drawing out learners' responses towards texts. Nevertheless, the findings that irrespective of the readers' characteristics, readers are capable of being evoked by foregrounding suggest their application to learners as well, as evidenced in Khairul's (2016) study.

IMPLICATIONS OF IMPORTANCE OF TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION LEARNERS' AESTHETIC RESPONSE TOWARDS LITERARY LANGUAGE IN PRODUCING GRADED READERS

A plot or a good story has been recognised as the most important element in delivering an aesthetic or pleasurable experience to the reader. Form, therefore, plays second fiddle to the plot, which is understandable and expected. The fear of putting emphasis on form in learner reading material stems from the fear of having to make a compromise on readability. Waring (2003), an academician, also a writer and series editor of GRs, suggested that the use of figures of speech may cause difficulty to L2 readers, and is hence to be discouraged, especially for lower level material. As such many publishers of learner reading material are too fearful to step out of the linguistic boundary (Hill, 1997).

In trying to sustain readability, the role of form in generating pleasure has been mostly forgotten or ignored, despite the observation made by West (1964), a pioneer of learner reading material, that some adapted books read more like abstracts, lacking language beauty. Since West (ibid.) was making reference to adaptations whose plots have been time-tested, his remarks suggest the importance of form in making appealing reads. In other words, West (ibid.) suggests that a good storyline alone is inadequate to deliver a good text.

Brumfit (1985), a GR writer, advocates and appreciates the presence and significance of foregrounding. Brumfit (1985, p.96) shares his exasperation of seeing interesting expressions such as "she was coming to the evening of life" being replaced with mundane ones "she was very ill" by editors who fear to have to compromise on readability, and opines that L2 learners have been assumed to be blank, unliterary slates. He (Brumfit, 1985, p.99) suggests that EFL publishing policies "may lead to the conclusion that foreign readers are ignorant, stupid and illiterate in their mother tongue". In the same vein, Maley (2008) concurs that linguistic proficiency is not in symbiosis with intellectual capacity. To Brumfit (1985, p.99), "colour and humour may be far more important than word level", but this does not mean having to make concessions on readability. The use of figures of speech in contributing to the success of very young children's timeless storybooks such as Where the wild things are (Bine-Stock, 2006) is a testimony to Brumfit's (1985) premise.

Prominent advocates of intuitive writing, "neologists" of the term language learner literature Day and Bamford (1998) are insistent on the communicative intent of the audience. They assert that a side effect of intuitive writing is texts that are easier to read. This is because when the focus is on communication, "the language suggests itself" (p.65). Hence, intuitive writing should precede simple language. Furthermore, they professed that communicating with language learners is not just about bringing together content and language, not just a technical process, just as "truly making love goes beyond a how-to manual like The Joy of Sex; and thus "it is time, therefore, to consider language learner literature on its own merits, as a genuine art form" (p.67).

McRae (1991) asserts that for reaction and response to take place to evoke affect and create impact, unfamiliarity and unexpectedness are necessary. However, unfamiliarity may not necessarily cause problems to the L2 reader. The use of poetic or figurative expressions does not mean not adhering to simple language, since what is common to native speakers may be unfamiliar or unexpected to the learner due to their smaller linguistic world (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.75). Since the success of GRs is marked by their ability to communicate with affect and impact, Day and Bamford (ibid) describe editors who allow the use of poetic or figurative language in learner material as "sensible".

Studies by Khairul et al. (2012) and Khairul (2016) confirm the role of stylistic devices in enhancing L2 readers' experience. In their study, Khairul et al. (2012) discovered that seventeen-year-old L2 Malaysian students are capable of responding aesthetically to foregrounding elements in texts. They found that both the narrative and aesthetic dimensions contribute to reader engagement. Although the narrative dimension is capable of eliciting a more evoking response, it is the aesthetic response that may provide a more satisfactory reading experience.

Rosenblatt (1978) has theorised that it is the act of transaction between the text and the reader that brings about evocation, and it is the evocation that makes communication successful with its reader, that causes the text to be experienced aesthetically by the reader. Another theory that resonates with Rosenblatt's doctrine is Miall and Kuiken's (2002) foregrounding theory which postulates that a reader's aesthetic experience is magnified by foregrounding or stylistic devices. And studies have shown that the use of foregrounding devices have the potential to deliver the aesthetic experience to the reader regardless of the readers' reading or linguistic characteristics (Miall and Kuiken, 1994; Miall, 2006; Van Peer et al., 2007; Khairul et al., 2012; Khairul, 2016). As such, the two theories are of relevance to language learners as well. In view of this, it is pertinent that the readers' aesthetic response be taken into consideration in producing good reads.

CONCLUSION

In essence, it is important to create GRs that are capable of maximising the learners' aesthetic response to be able to appeal to L2 learners for successful ER. Publishers depend on plots to do the job, and place importance on readability and quality of writing as well. Day and Bamford (1998) assert that communicative quality of the text, that is the ability of the text to communicate with its audience, is what makes good texts. Having communicative quality can be interpreted as having a text-reader transaction, a theory by Rosenblatt (1978) that states that a transaction takes place when there is an evocation of feelings which leads to aesthetic or pleasurable reading. If the reader assumes more of the aesthetic stance, the meaning is evoked by feelings and the experience with the text is elevated. Rosenblatt's (1978) reader

response theory and Miall and Kuiken's (2002) foregrounding theory premise the importance of foregrounding devices for an aesthetic transaction, since the use of stylistic devices may heighten the readers' feelings regardless of their (the readers') characteristics. Whilst a good story and readability have been agreed upon to be the most important factors in producing GRs, the aesthetic response of the learner which is induced by foregrounding has been mostly neglected. Since studies have shown that readers', regardless of their characteristics, have the capacity to respond aesthetically to foregrounding, producers of GR texts should not neglect this knowledge in their strife to produce successful GRs that maximise learners' aesthetic reading experiences.

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