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# Applied Literature: Expanding Cultural Understanding For Language Learners

Ahmed Sallam

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**APPLIED LITERATURE: EXPANDING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING FOR  
LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

by

**AHMED SALLAM**

**B.A. IN ARTS AND EDUCATION OF ENGLISH**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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**LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDIES**

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**B.A., English, Damanhur University, 2011**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study contributes to the empirical research on the use of literary texts in language learning. Specifically, it focuses on two groups of adult English language learners who are students at an American university as they read, write about, and discuss literature written by an author from the local area and which portrays the local culture in which the university is situated. This study seeks to examine how adopting an aesthetic stance can help foreign students, new to the university, evoke a wide range of responses and pay attention to language input and cultural context.

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## Introduction

“Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become” (C. S. Lewis, n.d). Lewis’s view of literature captures the function of literature in society, but tells us little about how this richness is achieved. It was Louise Rosenblatt (1938), in her book *Literature as Exploration*, who began to theorize how the reading of literature adds meaning to our lives. According to her reader response theory, meaning is created through a transaction between the reader and the text. Meaning does not reside in the text, but is created through the process of reading. Rosenblatt calls the meaning the *poem*.

In a transaction, both reader and text are fluid. The text is the catalyst for the reader’s thinking, and the reader makes the text come alive. She argued that a reader, when reading any text, adopts one of two stances, an efferent stance and/or an aesthetic stance. When adopting an efferent stance, readers aim to take away information from a text. On the other hand, when readers adopt an aesthetic stance toward a text, they experience the events and people as if they are living through them. Texts approached aesthetically are usually referred to as literature and evoke an experience, rather than just provide declarative information. Stances may shift during a reading event. Readers come to understand worlds created by authors through literature includes genre like poetry,

short stories and novels. Of course, it is more of a virtual experience, but these texts allow readers to see, hear, smell, touch, and even feel things that they otherwise might not have the opportunity to experience firsthand. Literature has to do with our lives; it expresses the beliefs, ideas and activities of members of that society, and at the same time offers a window into possibility.

Given that Rosenblatt's theory posits that meaning, or as she terms it, the *poem*, does not reside within the text, she argues that the study of meaning needs to take into account the reader's thoughts, background, and reading situation (Rosenblatt, 1995). In literary studies, she claimed, "the reader has tended to remain in shadow, taken for granted, to all intents and purposes invisible"(p.1). However, she posits that "the process of interpretation is more complex than that" (p.11). Her theory of reading brings the reader out of the shadows and into the spotlight. Reader response theory focuses on the reader and how the reader and the text both change in light of their transaction. Drawing on Dewey's explanation of how people experience and interpret art, Rosenblatt (1994) argues that teachers need to deal with literature as "a form of art" (Rosenblatt, 1994, P.22).

Reading is as a two- way process. It is not a context-free, but it is shaped by the text, the reader's background, and the context in which the reader is creating meaning. So, the focus of reader response is the meaning the reader makes with literature. Based on Rosenblatt's theory of transaction, Wolfgang (1972) presented an intriguing concept of reading. He concurs with Rosenblatt when he points out that the problem of reading, whether of a literary text or non- literary text is framed by the approach with which we handle it. But for Wolfgang, reading is something lies between realization and the text,



as a game played between the reader and the writer utilizing imagination. Readers use their imaginations to fill in the space between the written and the unwritten part of the text and its effect on the reader.

Rosenblatt (1994) in her book chapter 'the poem as event' illustrated the idea of the transaction between reader and text by examining the responses of some students to a quatrain by Robert Frost. This study showed multiple stages their responses, stages that they did not notice as they were asked to respond directly after reading, but indicated varying ways of interpreting the same text. These differences, Rosenblatt (2005) argues, need to be addressed in literature teaching. She explains that teachers are or, should be, closer to literature and to students and young American people than those literature scholars who view literature with the elite of the past. Arguing that literature is not a mere ink on paper and a matter of "living through not knowledge about" (p.63), she addressed how children need to be helped inside the classroom to feel free to give their own thoughts and ideas about literature. Because this is always the problem of literature, classroom teachers need to allow children to have a meaningful transaction with the text and to collectively negotiate meaning.

Rosenblatt's theory is the foundation for what Beach (1993) terms reader-response theories. These theories suggest the importance of understanding not only texts but also the readers as they make meaning or interpret those texts at particular times in particular places, as both individuals and in groups. Beach (1993) categorizes the various foci for different branches of reader-response theory. He outlines five primary perspectives on the transaction between reader, text and context. These five perspectives vary according to the context to finally come up as textual, experiential, psychological, social and cultural.

He also mentioned that each theorist focuses on one of these perspectives. Textual theorists focus on how the response is connected with the reader's knowledge about the genre conventions. In that sense we can say that, in the case of reading romantic poetry, the reader will depend on what he or she already know about romantic poetry to respond to the text. Experiential theorists focus on the experience a reader has in dealing with texts in terms of identifying with characters and their abilities to “visualize images, relate personal experiences to the text, or construct the world of the text” (Beach,1993, p.8). Psychological theorists focus on the cognitive and how the subconscious processes differ from one to another according to different personalities and how they affect people's responses. Social theorists focus on how social context influence reader response. Finally, cultural theorists focus on how different cultures shape different responses to different types of texts.

### **Literature and Second Language Learning**

Theories of reader response to, literature can play a valuable role in second language learning, enabling students to experience aspects of culture, make connections between their home culture and their new culture, and learn through this virtual event. Given Rosenblatt's notion that of literature provides a virtual, lived through experience, it follows that literature can provide language learners with some understanding of the culture in which their new language is used. This characteristic of reading is important because learning a language involves more than just memorizing vocabulary and adopting a new syntax. The words and sentences are embedded in a cultural context, and

understanding of that cultural context is vital to developing expertise in the target language.

The use of literature in second language instruction has a long history. In the time of teaching Latin and classic Greek, "Literature was initially the main source of input for teaching in language classes in the era of the Grammar Translation Method." However, its use was mainly as a vehicle for the study of vocabulary and syntax. With the advent of structuralism and the audio-lingual method, "it has been dropped down the pedestal" and "was downplayed and ergo discarded to the periphery" (Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011, p.1). In current Communicative Language Teaching approach, literature continues to be neglected and more attention is given to dialogues and conversations which are more practical and visible in the real world situation (Khatib et al, 2011).

But literature in second language classrooms has not been completely ignored. Maley(1989) advocates using literature in second language classrooms. Literature, he says, is valuable for second language learners because of its universality, non-triviality, personal relevance, variety, interest, economy and suggestive power, and ambiguity. Universality refers to the common ground of themes that deal with the human condition across nations and cultures. Using literature proves students with important ideas to think about, rather than presenting them with simplified texts that focus only on language. he non-triviality of literature offers students important ideas to think about, instead of the simplified texts that is being used in language classes, personal relevance means that the stories in literature can touch the reader because it is related to the human experience in general which is a reason to make literature interesting for students, variety is the wide

range of ideas, themes, topics, and languages that literature can offer, interest as a result of variety and the personal relevance, economy and suggestive power refer to the amount of ideas and suggestions for interpretations that a single piece of literature can offer, and ambiguity refers to the space literature leaves to readers' various and diverse interpretations.

These features presented by Maley supports what Pilar (2007) also presented in a paper examining the reasons why literature should be used in language classrooms: linguistic, methodological, and motivational. Linguistically, literature provides the reader with genuine samples of language. In the classroom methodology, literature opens up space for different opinions and interpretations that in return create a motivated and interactive classroom atmosphere. Finally, literature motivates the reader because it allows students to connect it to their own personal experiences. To illustrate his point, Pilar explored the possibility of using of a poem by T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in the ESL classroom. He selected the poem as one that illustrated the three reasons for using literature. He finds it to be an interesting poem that has undeniable motivational power in its representation of real life. He also mentioned that it is culturally, historically and literary relevant. These two scholars provide strong rationales for incorporating literature into language classrooms, but they do not address exactly how to go about doing so.

Other researchers provide pedagogical guidance. Lazar(1993) identifies three approaches for using literature in language learning. The first approach is the linguistic approach which recommends using literature to increase students' stylistic knowledge of the target language. The second approach is the literature-as-content approach, wherein the historical and cultural background of and information in a text is the focus of study,

and language use and understanding may improve as a result. The third is the literature-for-personal-enrichment approach, where the student is encouraged to draw on personal experience, stemming from reactions to the text, to become "more actively involved both intellectually and emotionally in learning" the target language (Lazar, p. 24). These approaches incorporate how the affective influence of literature affects their understanding of the cultural background which is always given in a literary text and how the nature of studying literature as reflecting and interacting with the text allows students for more involvement in the target language.

Scott (1964) also considers literature to be "one of the most obvious and valuable means of attaining cultural insights"(p.490) and argued for literature to be used as a means for immersing students in the cultural prospective of the target language. Lazar (1993) concurs and recommends that literary texts can be used to engage and motivate learners and to provide more ready and deeper connections with target cultures. It can also be used as tool for creating discussions and opens more opportunities for critical thinking.

In the 1980's and 90's, practitioners and language scholars called for the resurrection of literature as language learning material in language classrooms (Carter & Burton,1982; Moulding, 1985; Brumfit and Carter, 1986; Gower & Pearson, 1986; Hill, 1986; Collie &Slater, 1987; Carter, Walker, & Brumfit, 1989; Maley & Duff, 1989; Maley, 1989b; Carter & Long, 1991; Duff & Maley, 1991; Maley & McRae, 1991 Bassnett & Grundy, 1993; Lazar, 1993; Belcher & Hirvela, 2000). In spite of a great deal of enthusiasm for bringing literature back to the area of language learning, it is still neglected in most

language programs. Maley (2001) attributed this phenomenon to a lack of empirical research confirming the significance of literary input for language classes.

More recently, scholars have conducted empirical studies that aimed to test using literature inside language classrooms. Nodeh and Kiani (2011) examined the possibility of using novels in EFL classrooms. They focused their research on novels and the instructional activity of role playing. Their results led them to conclude that "using literature and role-playing enhances students' active participation and subsequently increases their self-confidence. Moreover, through using novels, students are given a chance to confront 'authentic materials' in real-life context and this leads them to enhance their understanding of conversational discourse" (p.287) He also argued that role playing improves language learners' awareness of role-relationships reflected through the conversation within the text and it enables them to improve almost all language skills and to acquire a great deal of language. Yusoff, Zillian (2004) also examined the role of culture familiarity in understanding literature. He was testing how a person's knowledge of the culture enables him to better understand its literature. Even though this study examines the effect of cultural familiarity on understanding literature, it demonstrates the reciprocal nature of culture and literature.

Adopting a reader response approach, Liaw (2001) studied the responses of some Taiwanese university students to five American short stories. Data Analysis in this study showed how their responses went further than just comprehension and how they made meaning through complex interactions with the text. The study suggests that Literature, if handled with reader response – based approach, should not only be a language medium

but also participate in the process of cultural understanding that enhances reading in the target language.

This study seeks to engage a group of students in an aesthetic response and characterize their responses to two works of literature in order to better understand how an aesthetic stance might contribute to language and cultural learning which brings us to the study's research question.

### **Research question**

What are the responses of recently arrived foreign students at an American university to a piece of local literature?

### **Purpose of study**

The proposed study intends to contribute to the empirical research on the significance of reading literature for learning about a cultural milieu in which English is spoken. Specifically, this case study investigates how adopting the aesthetic stance can help foreign students, new to the university, interpret and learn about the socio-cultural context of the new city through reading two poems written by local author and that depict aspects of life indicative of local experiences.

### **Methodology**

The proposed study asked 5 participants to share their individual, reflective writing about literature and participate in a focus group (Merriam, 2014). These methodologies allow the researcher to collect both the individual and private interpretations of works of

literature and then the shared and more public interpretations that develop through social interaction (Rosenblatt, 1995). I chose two poems written by a New Mexican poet, Jimmy Santiago Baca: “Immigrants in Our Own Land” and “Green Chile.”

### **Immigrants in Our Own Land**

We are born with dreams in our hearts,  
looking for better days ahead.  
At the gates we are given new papers,  
our old clothes are taken  
and we are given overalls like mechanics wear.  
We are given shots and doctors ask questions.  
Then we gather in another room  
where counselors orient us to the new land  
we will now live in. We take tests.  
Some of us were craftsmen in the old world,  
good with our hands and proud of our work.  
Others were good with their heads.  
They used common sense like scholars  
use glasses and books to reach the world.  
But most of us didn't finish high school.  
  
The old men who have lived here stare at us,  
from deep disturbed eyes, sulking, retreated.



We pass them as they stand around idle,  
leaning on shovels and rakes or against walls.  
Our expectations are high: in the old world,  
they talked about rehabilitation,  
about being able to finish school,  
and learning an extra good trade.  
But right away we are sent to work as dishwashers,  
to work in fields for three cents an hour.  
The administration says this is temporary  
So we go about our business, blacks with blacks,  
poor whites with poor whites,  
Chicanos and Indians by themselves.  
The administration says this is right,  
no mixing of cultures, let them stay apart,  
like in the old neighborhoods we came from.  
  
We came here to get away from false promises,  
from dictators in our neighborhoods,  
who wore blue suits and broke our doors down  
when they wanted, arrested us when they felt like,  
swinging clubs and shooting guns as they pleased.  
But it's no different here. It's all concentrated.  
The doctors don't care, our bodies decay,

our minds deteriorate, and we learn nothing of value.

Our lives don't get better, we go down quick.

My cell is crisscrossed with laundry lines,

my T-shirts, boxer shorts, socks and pants are drying.

Just like it used to be in my neighborhood

from all the tenements laundry hung window to window.

Across the way Joey is sticking his hands

through the bars to hand Felipe a cigarette,

men are hollering back and forth cell to cell,

saying their sinks don't work,

or somebody downstairs hollers angrily

about a toilet overflowing,

or that the heaters don't work.

I ask Coyote next door to shoot me over

a little more soap to finish my laundry.

I look down and see new immigrants coming in,

mattresses rolled up and on their shoulders,

new haircuts and brogan boots,

looking around, each with a dream in their heart,

thinking they'll get a chance to change their lives.

But in the end, some will just sit around  
talking about how good the old world was.  
Some of the younger ones will become gangsters.  
Some will die and others will go on living  
without a soul, a future, or a reason to live.  
Some will make it out of here with hate in their eyes,  
but so very few make it out of here as human  
as they came in, they leave wondering what good they are now  
as they look at their hands so long away from their tools,  
as they look at themselves, so long gone from their families,  
so long gone from life itself, so many things have changed.

### **Green Chile**

I prefer red chile over my eggs  
and potatoes for breakfast.  
Red chile ristras decorate my door,  
dry on my roof, and hang from eaves.  
They lend open-air vegetable stands  
historical grandeur, and gently swing  
with an air of festive welcome.  
I can hear them talking in the wind,  
haggard, yellowing, crisp, rasping  
tongues of old men, licking the breeze.

But grandmother loves green chile.

When I visit her,

she holds the green chile pepper

in her wrinkled hands.

Ah, voluptuous, masculine,

an air of authority and youth simmers

from its swan-neck stem, tapering to a flowery collar,

fermenting resinous spice.

A well-dressed gentleman at the door

my grandmother takes sensuously in her hand,

rubbing its firm glossed sides,

caressing the oily rubbery serpent,

with mouth -watering fulfillment,

fondling its curves with gentle fingers.

Its bearing magnificent and taut

as flanks of a tiger in mid-leap,

she thrusts her blade into

and cuts it open, with lust

on her hot mouth, sweating over the stove,

bandanna round her forehead,

mysterious passion on her face

as she serves me green chile con carne

between soft warm leaves of corn tortillas,

with beans and rice—her sacrifice  
to here little prince.  
I slurp form my plate  
with last bit of tortilla, my mouth burns  
and I hiss and drink a tall glass of cold water.

All over the new city, sunburned men and women  
drive rickety trucks stuffed with gunny sacks  
of green chile, from Belen, Beguita, Willard, Estancia,  
San Antonio y Socorro, from fields  
to roadside stands, you see them roasting green chile  
in screen-sided homemade barrels, and for a dollar a bag,  
we relive this old, beautiful ritual again and again.

### **Why these poems?**

First of all, these two poems tell about two major themes that are prevalent in the New Mexican culture. One of them speaks about the immigration community and how Native peoples are often treated as immigrants. The other one is related to a food ritual with which many may already be familiar because it is often mentioned in on-line information about the state. Secondly, these two poems have a simple language for second language speaker who is studying English as a preparation for the academic life.

## **Participants**

A group of five participants chosen according to meet the following criteria. First, all participants are to be recently arrived undergraduate, graduate, and/or exchange students who attend English classes at a center devoted to helping new arrivals to develop their English language skills at a New Mexican university. The mission of this center is to prepare international professionals with the language skills necessary to succeed in a wide variety of academic studies or professional settings in the United States and in English speaking countries around the world. Students in the center also learn about American culture through participating in many activities on campus and by taking some trips around the new city. For a student to succeed at the Center, he is required to pass tests and to receive the score of the TOEFL test that is allows them to take courses at the university. The Center also helps students with application processing and academic advisement. The choice of this place guarantees that participants are recently arrived in the new city, which in turn suggests that these new comers will have similarly low social and cultural knowledge about the new city.

The second criterion is the level of English. All participants should be in the intermediate level of language or higher, which guarantees that the participants can handle a conversation in English and participate in the discussions. By selecting participants with similar levels of language competency, I sought to evoke a more comfortable feeling in the focus groups and perhaps limit feelings of exclusion.

## **Recruiting**

The study started in the summer of 2015. The first step was to recruit participants for the study. I recruited participants myself. I obtained permission to recruit students at the Center. I visited some of the intermediate and the upper intermediate classes to orally explain the project. My explanation of the project included the following points: The title of the study, the focus of the research, why they were being asked to participate in the study, and the time they were going to spend in case of participating, what they are supposed to do and what potential benefits they might gain. I also let them know that participating is completely optional and they have the absolute freedom to or not to participate and to withdraw from the study at any point with no restrictions.

I then passed around a sign-up sheet so students could give me their contact information if they were interested in participating. When I contacted some of them, only two were available during the time of the study, Dang from Thailand and Bora from South Korea. I emailed them the consent form, and we set up a meeting when I explained more about the study, and they brought sign the consent forms. The second recruitment place was the exchange students' community. One of my goals to achieve in the focus group was culture diversity, so I asked Livia, an exchange student from Brazil, if she would be willing to volunteer as a participant in my study. She was excited after I explained what the study is about, so she was my third participant for the summer. I decided to start my study with this group of three for two reasons: First, most exchange and Center students come in the beginning of the fall semester. I wanted to wait for the new students to keep the group as diverse as possible. Secondly, it would be to run the process two times. Such practice would help me become a better facilitator and allow for

more connections to be made across groups. In the beginning of the fall semester, I recruited my second group of two participants Ana from Germany and Dione from France.

### **Data Collection**

During the study, participants met with the researcher five times in a span of time of five weeks, 90 minutes per meeting. During these meetings, participants shared their backgrounds, read each poem, wrote responses, and then discussed each poem. At the end, they shared their reflections on their experiences as participants in the study. I collected all writing and audio recorded all discussion.

In the process of data collection, the aim was to help participants adopt an aesthetic stance while reading the poem so that they could experience the virtual reality the chosen poems could offer. I used prompts to guide the responses toward the cultural, social, textual, experiential, and psychological theories of response described by Beach (1993). The agendas for each meeting are included below.

#### **First meeting:** The introductory session

I introduced the project and explained what is expected from them as participants in this study. The main objective of this introductory session was to break the ice between me as a researcher and the participants in a way to communicate to them that the upcoming discussions were to be casual. The reason was to release the tension that could be caused from the researcher/participant situation which can easily affect the responses.



I then gave them a tutorial about what is going to be done in the following meetings. After that I got to know them and let them talk a bit about themselves and their backgrounds. This meeting was not audio taped.

**Second meeting:** Before reading the poem.

The objective of this session is to gather data about their perceptions of the new city and to get a strong idea about their linguistic level. This meeting was audio taped.

Before starting the discussion, I asked students to take 10 minutes to reflect on the suggested discussion questions. The purpose was to give them a chance to offer them an opportunity to practice the discussion and put their idea about the new city into English words.

**Discussion questions include:**

1. How do you like the new city?
2. What things you found different/ similar in the new city?
3. What things surprised you in the new city?
4. What things you felt difficult in communicating with people?
5. What did you get about people in the new city?
6. What do you think you should have to have an easy life in the new city?

**Third meeting:** Immigrants to Our Own Land

In the third meeting, participants read the first poem, "Immigrants to Our Own Land." I asked the participants to read the poem silently, and then to participate in reading the

poem out loud. After reading the poem, participants spent about 10 to 15 minutes writing in order to prepare for the discussion. I instructed them to use any or all of the following questions:

1. What else have you read that might be similar to this poem?
2. What impression of the new city did you get from reading the poems?
3. What questions does it raise for you?
4. What did you notice in the poem?
5. What are your connections/ disconnections about the poems?
6. What is the most important word or sentence you find in the poems? Why?
7. What do you think these poems tell about people in general and specifically life here in the new city?

A 45-minute discussion of the same questions followed the writing. Participants' writing was collected, and the discussion was audio recorded. The prompts used in this question aim to help participants adopt the aesthetic stance. All questions were meant to be reflective question not seeking information out of the texts.

**Fourth meeting:** Green Chili

The fourth meeting followed the same procedures, including the collection of participants' writing and audio taping the discussion, but with a different poem, "Green Chile," also by Jimmy Santiago Baca.

**Fifth meeting: Reflection**

The last meeting was a reflection on the process. In this meeting, participants were given the chance to reflect to the whole experience, comment on what they found useful, ask questions, and offer suggestions for using literature as part of language learning. The group wrote about and then discussed the following questions:

- How did you find the whole experience?
- Did it make difference? How? In what aspects?
- How do you think literature can be used after this experience?

Writing was collected, and the 45-minute discussion was audio recorded.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read- it is the process of making meaning (Merriam, 2014), In a qualitative study, data focuses on answering my research questions: What are the responses of recently arrived foreign students at the university to a piece of local literature?

My data analysis focused on clearly representing what the participants said, identifying themes in what each participant said and wrote, and then looking across the data from all participants to characterize the range of responses.

## **Transcription**

**In the first phase of data analysis, I read all writing and transcribed all audio recordings. I elected to do my own transcription so that I would be very familiar with the ideas presented. I transcribed the discussions word for word.**

## **Thematic Analysis**

After transcribing, I read each paper and transcript several times and noted the basic themes reflected in each part. Merriam (2014) mentioned that the challenge in constructing themes is to create themes that “capture some recurring pattern that cuts across the data”. I went through the participants individually and go through the main themes they discussed during their reflection.

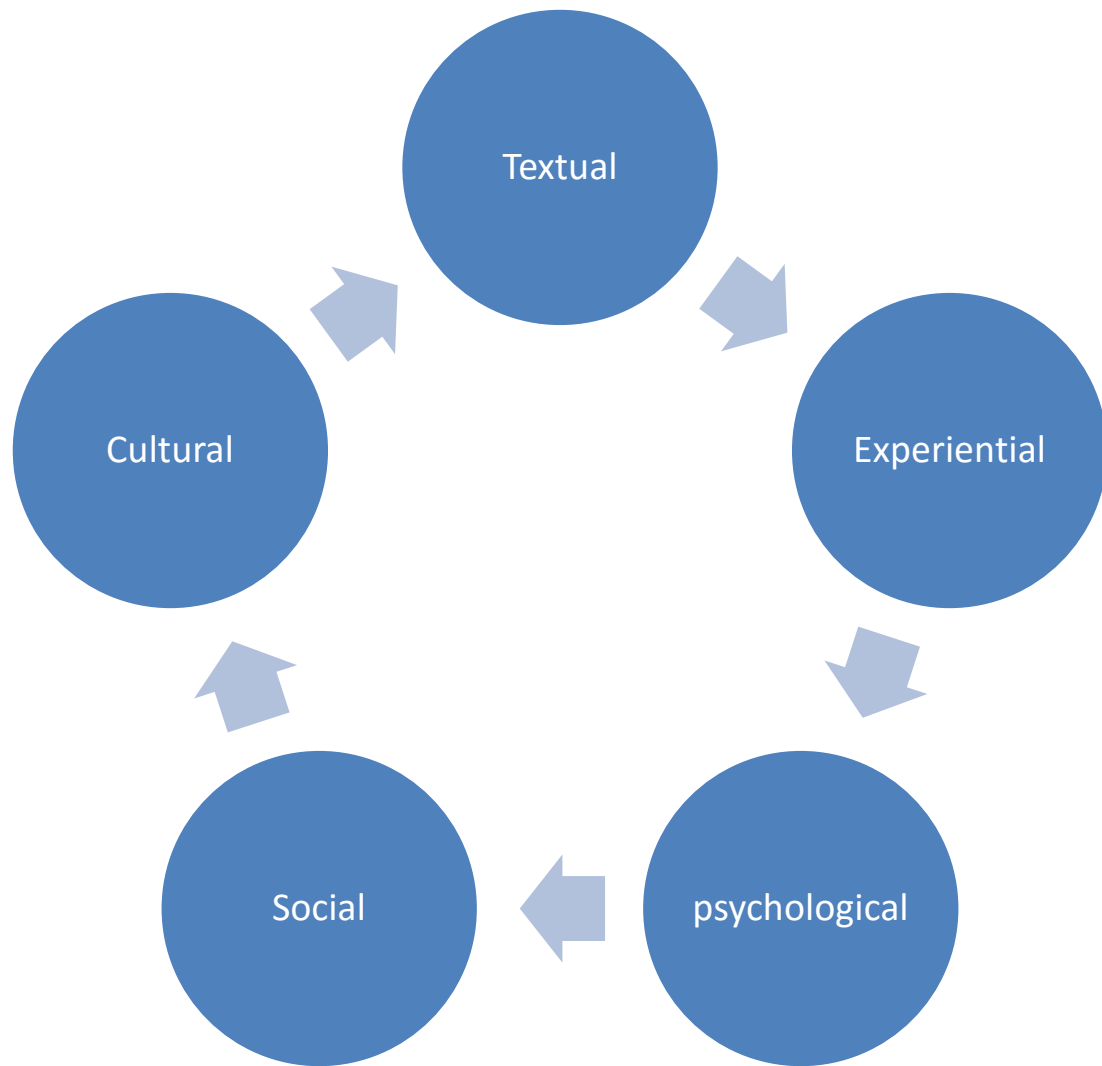
## **Categorization of Responses**

In order to characterize the range of all participants’ responses, I adapted Beach’s (1993) five categories of reader response: Textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural. Textual responses are indicated by statements about the structure, language, and genre of the poem. An example of a textual response is when, referred to Immigrants to Our land, Ana said it is more like “*writing a dairy*” than a poem and Dione said “*I do not know if I can consider this poem as a real poem because of the form*”. These responses often reflect familiarity with or puzzlement about the form of the poem. An experiential response is indicated when participants “identify with characters, visualize images, and

relate personal experiences to the text, or construct the world of the text" (Beach, 1993, p.8).

An example of an experiential response is the connection made by Livia and Bora to their own lives in response to immigrants to our own land while discussing the topic of the separation between races. A psychological response is indicated when a participant reveals a level of cognition through the way of dealing with the text. An example of a psychological response is the statement "*immigrants could be American people,*" made by Dang in response to 'Immigrants to our own land.' I categorized responses as social when a participant reflects their social roles to the poems. Social responses may also indicate the participants understanding of societal norms reflected in the poem. An example of social responses is when livia noted her interest in literature as it gives her chance to know about the histories of people's lives. The reason was, in her words "*maybe because my major is psychology*". Cultural responses focus on how different cultures shape different responses to different types of texts. Cultural responses are indicated by comments related to how participants' cultures, being different, influenced their understanding and comments on the extent to which they gained new cultural knowledge about the new city. Cultural responses include all participants sharing the cultural food in their home countries.

For purposes of this study, these categories represent the universe of possible responses and enable me to better represent the range of responses evoked within the larger group.



This figure shows the five categories of response I used to code the data. One important thing to mention is that those five categories are interrelated; they are connected and intertwined, influencing each other and resulting from one another. Therefore, I worked on classifying the related responses to each category depending on where they more related according to my own interpretation of the response.

## **Thematic Analysis**

I introduce my findings by presenting a profile of each participant individually, showing the themes that were brought up by him/her. I quoted them from the interview transcript because I find it more authentic if their responses and stories are told in their own words; I then put their words between quotation marks in italics to differentiate them from mine. I present you my participants whom I will call Livia, Bora, Dang, Ana, and Dione. I have assigned my participants pseudonyms to protect their identities. I use the names “New City” to represent the city in which the study was conducted, “University” to represent the university, and “Center” to represent the program in which all the participants were enrolled.

### **Livia**

Livia is an exchange student from Brazil. When we started the study, she has been in the new city for six months; she is studying psychology at the university during the exchange period and back in Brazil. Livia was familiar with literature as she studied some Brazilian literature during middle and high school, her reflections of the poem with highly influenced by this background. One more thing that highly affected Livia’s responses was her academic background. As a psychology major, her discussions were revolving around people’s history, way of thinking and feelings.

In the second meeting where we share everyone’s experience in the new city before going through the poems, Livia stated that she enjoyed her stay especially as an exchange student, however she wishes that the new city were a bigger city that has more activities to do when she said *“I like the new city, I like to live here. The whole like experience of*

*the exchange program is really different from the live that I am used to have in Brazil but sometime I wish that the new city was bigger, like you said I have been to some other places in the US. So, I wish like the city has more things.*” That is why she assured that if the new city doesn’t have the university, she would not have found any activities to do. Talking about her life as an exchange student at the university, she mentioned that living inside the university community makes her feel like living in a bubble where she is not aware of the other parallel world outside this bubble as she explained “*yes, Also sometimes I think when you live in the university, you live in a bubble you know because here everything is perfect and everyone have money*” She thinks that inside the university community, everything looks perfect and everyone has money but as she explained later “*If you go out, you take the bus; the city is not like that like there are a lot of homeless here and people who don’t have money so, I think some people who came here they do not notice that there is another the new city beside the university.*” Livia noted a huge gap in the social awareness among the international students community that happens normally when moving to a new community.

Not long after that, she started talking about how nice people are in the new city. She thinks that people are mostly nice building this on her experience of having some difficulties communicating with people when she first arrived here and how everyone was very nice trying to understand and help as she said “*I think in the most part they are nice because they try to understand you. At the beginning it was hard for me to speak in English and I can see that everybody was doing everything to understand me.*” This frames the whole experience in the first and the most important thing for almost every



exchange student which is trying to master the community's language as it develops more interaction with the new culture.

Then Livia said that she feels safe around the new city as compared to her hometown in Brazil. She talked about feeling safe walking around holding her cell phone in the street or in the bus. She was surprised because she cannot be that spontaneous in her home city as it is more dangerous as she said *"In here I feel very safe I can walk in the street and touch my cell phone in the street and in the bus but in Brazil we do not do this because it is dangerous. Someone can see it and steal it."* She also compared so specific everyday actions like not having to lock the door her on campus to having iron gates for protection in her hometown. She also talked about the lobo alert system which is responsible for sending warnings about any irregular action happens around campus area so people will take it into consideration. She mentioned how this is different in Brazil as she explained *"Here I feel safe. Every time some rape or rob occurs, they let us know, they send an e-mail. In my city in Brazil, it is not like that because it happens a lot; it is not something that they can control. Some times when it happens they do not tell anybody because it is not good for the image of the university."* She then talked about the difference in food culture here and in Brazil when she said *"the food is really different. Like food here is so fat. Here they have a lot of pizza and hamburgers. It is very easy to gain weight. In Brazil we eat beans, rice, salads but not like here pizza every day."*

### **Third meeting: response to Immigrants to Our Own Land**

According to Livia, she had an experience with poetry as a literature genre in high school as she said *"I studied in high school like three years of high school literature of*

*Brazil so, I study all the generation like romance, realism ....”* Based on that experience, the first impression she made about the poem was catching a theme of poverty in the poem and connecting it to her knowledge of the poverty of the northeast part of Brazil which came from some poems that she read before as she said *“So, I remember that I read some poems from Brazil that they talk about the poverty that Brazil has in the Northeast because in the northeast of Brazil it is very hot like all the year like they do not have the four seasons.”* Then she listed some of the information about this part of Brazil the very hot weather and the same life style they all have. She, in this example basically connected her impression about this poem to her experience from reading other poems. Her experience with this part of her country came from literature and now she is recalling the experience by reflecting to this poem that she is reading today. This shows how powerful the literary text is in the sense that it gives you real, thorough experiences of real life which matches with what Rosenblatt (2005) described as a "living through" experience.

In the meeting before reading the poem, Livia presented the idea of the life that most students have compared to the real life she discovered outside campus. After reading the poem she recalled this idea again and mentioned it relating to the poem *“The thing I told you before (referring to the previous interview) So, I was talking to him about that when you live in the university, you live in bubble, it is perfect and rich and we have a lot of activities but when we go out the university and you take the bus, you see that life is not like that, you see a lot of homeless”* The difference between the first and the second time was how she presented it. The first time she was proposing an idea, just an idea that she notices sometimes when she goes off campus somewhere walking. Before reading the

poem she used the phrase “I think” to say the idea but after reading the poem, she was surer about the idea, more comfortable to share it as a fact which encouraged her to engage the others in the room. She asked if they took the 66 bus before and she was sure that they saw what she is going to say. Most importantly, this example shows how the poem is attached to society and real life.

In the next few minutes of the interview, Livia raised the topic of the American dream that people live here and/or expect before coming. Her connection came from the idea that the immigrants in the poem have these expectations about the new life they will get when they found the complete different as she said “*people come here; they don’t find the life they expected. I think ... I do not know if they are from another country like Mexico, maybe you guys had the same idea before coming here.*” She then mentioned movies and TV shows as the reason for this gap. She thinks that every movie and TV show presents life in the united states as an easy life where dreams come true and as the life of opportunities as she explained “*in the movies everything is perfect you have a lot of opportunities, you can work here as a waitress and have a lot of money, everyone here has a car and has a good life.*”

Talking about movies and TV shows brought up the example of Breaking Bad, which is a TV show that takes place in the new city and it tells a story about a man who has a cancer and he cannot afford the cost of treatment so he switched his life from a chemistry teacher to methamphetamine producer and seller. This TV show as she clarified “*the only show I see people who do not have money to pay the bills. So, it is a show that shows a little bit of the poverty that people sometimes go sell drugs because they don’t have money*”. She then shared an example from her life experience about how not easy it is to

find a job even as an American when she said “*I have two friends they are two months searching for a job and they can’t get to any place. So, it is not easy live here and they are American but they are not from the new city*”.

It is interesting in the last part of Livia’s contribution to the discussion to watch the branching of ideas, moving from the suffering in immigrants’ life to the idea of the false expectations then how media shows a not very accurate image about life in the United States followed by an example of a TV show that she sees as an exception of this rule to the example of here two friends who found a difficulty job hunting to prove her point. This chain of ideas shows the power of intrigue caused by the poem as it is able to give very flexible frame that applies to so many ideas that can branch out and expand.

After that, Livia picked part of the poem that she wanted to comment on,

‘So we go about our business, blacks with blacks,  
poor whites with poor whites,  
chicanos and indians by themselves.  
The administration says this is right,  
no mixing of cultures, let them stay apart  
like in the old neighborhoods we came from’

Livia made an interesting reflection based on her own background live in the United States she thinks that people feel safer staying closer to people from their own race as she explained “*I think people scared from knowing something new and I have a friend and she is black and all her friends are black. I think they feel safe in their groups. And I went to Chicago and they have whole neighborhoods that are only for black people. This is a*

*bit weird.*” She then mentioned an example of her friend that she met at the university who is from Mexico and lived her whole life in the United States but still in the Mexican community speaking Spanish and going to places where Mexican people usually go to hang out with Mexican people only because as Livia said *“I think they feel safe in their communities”*. She then referred to herself as an example of this, she mentioned that when she first came to the university, she used to be surrounded all the time with people from her culture as she felt safe then after a while she decided to get out of the group and meet other cultures and speak English still she said *“some of the Brazilians they hang out with Brazilians the whole exchange program, they don’t have many international friends. So, I am glad that I get off the group.”*

It is also interesting to see how Livia connected her life story and her experience to the poem. She used so many ideas, concepts in the poem to relate to her life. She also related to emotions as well as parts of the text. By the end of our discussion around this poem, as we pick everyone’s favorite part of the poem, Livia said that her favorite part is *“But in the end, some will just sit around talking about how good the old world was.”* The reason why she chose this part is, in her words *“This sentence shows the principle idea of the text, it shows that people regret to come.”* which is basically Livia’s general outtake of the poem.

#### **Fourth meeting: Green Chili**

The first contribution Livia made to the discussion about ‘Green Chili’ was related to her past experience with poems that seem to share the same content. She shared her experience with poems that talk about food, as she mentioned that she doesn’t really

remember a specific one but she mentioned that these poems are from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and they talk about food and memories attached to this food as she said *“I remember poems talking about food and the memories that they have together with this food like in childhood or something like that”*. She after that shared some of the popular food in Brazil like white rice and black beans which she mentioned before in the second meeting that it is quite different from the types of food in the united stated. Then she shared also some of the international food typed they have in Brazil like MacDonald’s, Japanese food like sushi which is, as she mentioned *“the most popular thing is Sushi, people love to go there but is very expensive but people go there”*.

Then she talked about the impression she had by reading the poem which was, in my opinion, clear and direct as she said that *“the impression that red chili and green chili are the popular food of the state”*. She then questioned this by asking *“why the red and green chili is the main food here. I have a friend from Mexico and all this food like tortilla, burrito, where did it come from? Did they come from Spain or Mexico and he told me this is from Mexico. So, green chili is something American or from Mexico or from here?”*

This question was a little surprising because Jimmy talked about green chili as a New Mexican ritual, at least this is how I read it, but she still had this question of where it came from. From another prospective I can tell that the uniqueness and the diversity of the state does have a special effect on the reception of the state’s tradition, it always gives some intrigue and makes you always question if it was originally New Mexican or was it part of other culture’s influence?

Livia mentioned before that she sees the poem as memories attached to food as she said *“I noticed that the author talked about memories, preferences and facts about green*

*chili.*” then she continues arguing towards the same idea as she said “*I wrote here that this poem shows how much is food attached to memories.*” She after this mentioned that she has so many memories attached to food as it is a habit to celebrate things over food in her city as she explained “*In my city we always go to a place and eat, you know to celebrate something, to have a meeting so, food is something that makes people together. Like let us have a BBQ together or go to that place.*” which explains why she had this first impression of the poem.

### **Reflection**

In the last meeting, we discuss our reflection to the whole study, how everyone found the whole experience, how beneficial it was to everyone and if there are any suggestions that would be helpful in the future of this process. As an exchange student who came here for a short time, the first thought she has is improving her English as she said “*is an opportunity for us to practice our English because we are here to learn*” which is a big part of the study as it was directed to international students in the first place. The process of the study helps improve the four skills of a language as you read the poem, reflect in a written way then you discuss which involves listening and speaking which happened with Livia as she assured that “*I agree with you guys, I think my English skills are improved.*” she then moved to talk about the cultural benefit of literature as she said “*I guess this experience make us know more about here.*” she then mentioned that she reads the new to know about the country. She said “*I read the CNN website for the news I think we know about the country. So, I think literature is a good way to do this.*”

Livia then talked about some benefits she thinks this study has. First she talked about getting to know other people's opinion through discussing the poem then she said how it helps her to understand people who live here, their culture and their food as she said "*I guess it is very important to learn other opinions because you have your own vision, and I think the poems help us to understand more the people who live here, the culture, the food*". She then mentioned what the poems made her learn when she said "*it was a good experience in general to learn a lot of things to think more about the city that we live, about the American dream*" not to mention that the American dream was a big part of her response to 'Immigrants to Our Own Land'. She then summed everything up by saying "*When you read this thing about people here who have these experiences you understand what is going on*". She also mentioned later about the difference between before and after reading the poem is "*that I have a deeper understanding in the new city people and the new city*".

She then referred to some poems that she studied before and how they were only, in her words, "*just one meaning one emotion*". She was referring to the way she studied the poems from one perspective which opposes what we did in this study as an open discussion for sharing different interpretation and different points of views.

Livia then showed a full understanding of the process. She mentioned her interest in poetry as a way to think of people's histories as she said "*I think it help we to understand how people live their lives how people think by reading literature Because like today when I read a book, I like to have books to have history of people's lives maybe because my major is psychology*". Then she rephrased what she said before about literature and people's life understanding adding that it makes her think about her life,



other types of life and other ways to solve problems as she said “*Literature makes me think about my life and make me see other types of life; make me think about other ways to solve problems*”

**Bora:**

Bora is English as a second language student originally from South Korea. During the study time, she was in a summer English program at the university studying English as a second language. Bora was insecure about her English competency; she hesitated to participate because she thought it will be hard for her to make good discussion. This to somehow affected her expression of ideas but as we were done with the first meeting where I have them to ask about anything they might want to know about the study, she got a little more confident that she can be an active member of the study. Bora’s response was affected by her previous experience with the colonial poetry she read and/or studied before in South Korea about the era of the Japanese colonization. This background helped her share more and get over the language insecurity.

Bora’s first impression about the city was an opposing idea to what she has been told about the new city as a dangerous place. She said that she doesn’t think that homeless people are dangerous because they always greet her as she mentioned “*I went to Wal-Mart and took buss 766, I saw so many homeless in my thinking they are not very dangerous because they contacts with me they say hello so, nothing so dangerous.*” She then mentioned the source of her information as “*in the first week, we had a meeting who live here he is from Korea. He said to us you can’t take a bus because bus is so dangerous.*” Another source of information is the orientation which is done for new

international students who come to the university where all new student are been warned from walking alone in the streets in some places because it might be dangerous. All this affect the first impression but Bora's impression was surprising as she thinks that it is not dangerous.

In our discussion about likes and dislikes, she mentioned Pizza, cheap stores and that not like South Korea, in the new city; you can see the sky because there aren't tall buildings. She then came back to the topic of homeless people and the difference between the new city and South Korea in this sense as she said "*in Korea, if there were some homeless, people call the police and tell them homeless people in here and the police come and say you can't in hear. So, we don't have a lot of experience to meet homeless people.*" After this, she talked about her experience with people and how she thinks people here are really nice and helpful giving that example of the woman that gave her a bag for free because her bag was torn, "*I was coming back from Wal-Mart and my bag was broken because so many stuff and a homeless person gave me her bag, for free. I said is it free for me, she said yes, I said oh you are so nice thank you thank you thank you*".

Bora also mentioned the language gap she struggles with while talking to people. She also mentioned that the culture difference is one reason for this by this example of the sales people talking to her always in the store and she is having a problem expressing her feelings and thoughts as she said "*In the stores here the sales persons talk to you. I am afraid I can't express my feeling. I can understand them but I can't express my feelings.*"

### **Third meeting: response of Immigrants to Our Own Land**

Bora has an experience with literature; she mentioned that in South Korea student should study literature in middle school and high school to be able to enter the university. One type of poetry she was exposed to was colonial poetry as she said *“In Korea we have an experience of colony by Japan so we have a lot of poetry about that period, they express their sadness and hope for independence and so many thing.”* After the colonization, she said *“we experienced Korean War. So it was colony poetry and then war poetry and then democracy poetry.”*

According to her experience with colonial poetry and based on her background about colonization in her own nation, she interpreted the poem as a colonial poem as she said *“When I see this poem, I think the homeless in Central. I think the new city is Invaded land.”* She interpreted the poem from a colonial prospective. She had a whole different interpretation to the poem from the other two participants she was discussing the poem with, which is why after a bit of a discussion around the poem, she said that *“Actually my thinking, I misunderstand this poem.”* because she thinks that the new city is an invaded land and everyone else said it was about immigration. I then told her that she cannot misunderstand a poem and this is her interpretation which for me makes a lot of sense as it reflects her educational, cultural experience. This example shows how one’s culture can totally direct the interpretation of poetry or literature in general.

Later in the discussion when Livia pointed out to this idea of people feeling comfortable being with other people from their ethnicity, Bora agreed according to what she sees in her dormitories as she clarified *“. In the dorms, whites communicate with*

*white and black communicates with blacks. They feel safe in their community.*” She then related to herself as an example when asked about the number of Korean friends she has she said she has eleven. Both she and Livia related to this idea because they themselves had this experience besides observing it happening around them. This past example showed me how discussing literature is always rich with ideas. Sometimes during a literary discussion you might find one interesting idea that was raised by someone and relate to it and realize maybe that you have been having this idea in mind for a long time, it just was not present at the moment.

Bora had a disconnection with the feeling of sadness that is all over the text. According to her experience, she doesn’t feel this sadness as she said *“I see people here, homeless people they seem happy, because they are always smiling to us.”*

#### **Fourth meeting: Green Chili**

In response to green chili, Bora stated the most popular food in South Korea which is fried chicken as she said *“In Korea, Fried chicken is very popular, they respect chicken so much and we have some poetry talking about it.”* She was asked by Livia if it is similar to Kentucky Fried Chicken which the United States is famous for but she said that it is different as they have so many types of chicken. She also said that Korea has a lot of international food places everywhere around the country.

After that we were talking about the relationship between the poem and the new city, she mentioned that she searched about food in the new city before coming here and she found out that Green and red Chili are popular here in the new city she said that she also got a pack of green chili in the orientation session as she said *“In the orientation time I*

got a pack of green chili so I knew it is really popular in the new city". Her quote from the poem was "we relive this beautiful ritual again and again." she said she thinks it is the main sentence of the poem.

## **Reflection**

Bora mentioned two or three times that she doesn't understand the purpose of the study as she said "*I do not understand the purpose of the project cause in my country I did some projects to find something in my major.*" She also said that she has been a participant in some other studies back in Korea where she was asked to relate something to some other thing by which she meant relating one variable to another and that is why she was confused about what all this is about. She said that everything was clear in the study but the problem is she does not understand about how I can get results from this process. I then illustrated how everything works and how this study is different in the structure than those she has been participating in before.

Bora then shared her experience with studying literature which in my opinion shows the worldwide approach that is used to teach literature as she said "*English poem is a little bet easy because in Korea when we study poetry, we almost analyze every word and word and then imagine the word which has three or four meaning. But here it is just read and feel to express so I think I can read the English poems better than Korean poem.*"

The reason why she thought it is easier to read English poetry however it is in her foreign language is that the approach here is to freely interpret and make connections and disconnections and this is the concern of the study. She, at the end mentioned that she

remembers the immigration poem when she sees poor people in the streets as she said *“when I see the homeless or the poor in the street, I can imagine the immigration poem.”*

As a English as a second language student in the United States , it was expected that she refers back to how she benefited from the study in what is related to language as she said *“reading poetry and discuss it, my English skill I think my English is a little bit enhanced.”* She also made a conclusion that it will be also the same benefit if it was drama or anything else. She generalized the rule and said that whenever we share, we can enhance our English as she mentioned *“it is not only in poetry, because if we are watching drama and we are discussing we can enhance our English. So, it is not limited to poetry. Whenever we share we can enhance our English skills.”*

Bora’s last comment was about her experience with poetry and its main purpose as history and to know about the authors’ viewpoint. She also she shared what she thinks about it as not only a history resource but a way by which we can be introduced to other generations as she said *“we can know about other generations, everything about the generation.”*

## **Dang**

Dang is English as a second language student originally from Thailand, by the time of the study; he has been in the new city for six months. He was studying English as a second language in the university and he has a bachelor in communication and film making. Dang’s background in filmmaking had a great influence in his response to poetry as he was open to give more than one interpretation to the same idea. He most of the time

was either picking images from the poem or drawing them when telling a story in response to the poems.

In his first contribution to the discussion, he mentioned that he has been here for six months and he doesn't like it anymore as he clarified "*It looks like my country, it is hot and it doesn't have some place, some interesting place to go.*" but in the other hand, he mentioned some stuff that he likes about her like go hiking in the Sandias but he wanted to see some other places. Then he compared his experience in the new city to the one in North Carolina. According to him, people in the new city are nice and not racist as he mentioned "*It is different when I lived in North Carolina for three months and people are racist. They think I am a black person and I am not clean and I look dangerous. But when I came here everyone looks like me. I look like a Mexican person or Spanish I do not know so much. But I feel more comfortable.*"

In addition to the hot weather in Thailand, Dang also mentioned one other similarity which is the diversity in society. He said that it is so similar to see people from, Mexico, Spain or India here as in Thailand as you can see people from China, Japan and Malaysia because, according to him "*The country around Thailand they always want to stay in Thailand.*"

As the topic of homelessness was brought up, Dang said that homeless people in Thailand are different from what he saw in the new city. In his words "*In Thailand, homeless always do something to make money. Like they use a trash to make a song or to make a music.*" which is, in his opinion, different from what he sees here as homeless people come to him and ask if he has a little money as he said "*They do not do anything they just sit down and wait for some money to come.*"

He also talked about the food culture, he said that food in Thailand is a lot cheaper than the United States as in Thailand you can buy a dish of food for one dollar. He also mentioned some differences in how people sell and buy food in Thailand Like *“in Thailand you can buy food from street the street but here I don’t think people can stand in the side walk, they have to buy something inside a shop.”*

### **Third Meeting: Immigrants to our own Land**

Dang does not have that much of an experience with poetry as he just read poetry when his teacher told him to do so, he also referred to how he used to study poetry by always focusing on what was the purpose of the writer when he wrote the poem as he said *“Our problem (he meant: goal) always was to know what was the purpose of the person who wrote it.”* He then mentioned the difference in content between this poem and most poems he read in Thailand as he said *“The most poems in Thailand is about the author wrote a poem for a woman or for to tell people how to live correctly.”* He Also mentioned that the main reason of poetry is, if not to a woman, is to motivate you to seek better life.

He as well as Livia discussed the topic of expectations versus reality when it comes to immigration. Livia mentioned that people come here with high expectations about life that change when they come and face reality, this discussion took a fair amount of time. Dang reflected to Livia’s idea in a slightly different way as he compared how he thought of life before and after the poem as he said *“When we think of Americans, we think they are all rich and life is perfect. When I read this Poem, I changed my mind.”* He said it is really important to know the reality of things as he said *“when we talk about American*



*culture, we think that American culture is good. There are a lot of poor people in America and is good for me to know that. This is a dramatic poem but I am good to know and realize that some of American people are like that*", which then lead to some questions that came up when he read the poem like "*Where these people in the poem come from?*", which he then guessed the answer to as these people are mostly Mexicans and are all from South America.

Then he made another interpretation to the whole poem referring to Thai people. He said that those immigrants could be Thai people as he heard that their lives are similar to the one in the poem when they decide to immigrate to the United States. Then he made a whole new interpretation to the poem relating to one authentic idea which as he interpreted "*immigrants could be American people.*" He thought about the poem as symbolic unit that refers to American people themselves who do not really feel home because of their life difficulties. This idea was novel and intriguing which is why after he said it I felt the urge to follow up with some related ideas and examples that could relate to this interpretation in a way or another.

He agreed with Livia in what she mentioned about the influence of media in creating the gap people have about life in the United States as he said "*In the movies the poorest people already have house, maybe a small house but they have house, they do not have a lot of money but they still have a house.*" Not a long after that, when Livia mentioned the idea of people feeling more comfortable within people from their own culture and that is why there is a separation between races, he disagreed. He said that where he used to work, everyone was working with everyone as he said "*Like, I have work in a fast food restaurant. White people work with black people, they do not separate them.*" but yet he

mentioned one possible explanation to the while idea as he said *“I think people do not like to separate, they want to do something together but the authorities want to group people.”*

Dang’s choice of his favorite sentence, in my opinion, reflects his cinematic background as he chose one of the most cinematic images Jimmy created in the poem like *“I sit down and I see new immigrants coming in.”* which was his favorite sentence.

#### **Fourth meeting: Green Chili**

Dang started his discussion by giving examples of what poetry related to food he have read before. As he mentions, it is mostly related to the royal food and how it remains exclusive till the woman who prepares it retires as he said *“we have a lot of poems about food. It is about the woman who prepares the food for the king, people outside cannot eat it. But when the woman retires, she can tell the food recipe to people and then they can eat it”*. While sharing the international food every country has, he talked about the Korean food places that are around Bangkok and how people love Korean food which was surprising for all of us.

As Dang mentioned, in the harvest season in Thailand, people sing songs for god while working in fields, so when he thought of the word “ritual” in the poem he interpreted it as something religious that people do, and by something religious he meant that people here might be doing the same singing while working in chili fields as he said *“if I understand correctly, about ritual, is it something related to god”* which shows how his response is affected directly by his cultural background which then lead to his favorite part of the text as *“we relive this beautiful ritual again and again”*.

### **Fifth meeting: Reflection**

Dang pointed out some interesting topics during his reflection to the study. The first one was about his feeling towards the study before and after it started and before and after it ended as he said *“before I come to this meeting, I thought that this meeting is gonna be so hard for me, when I came it is not hard at all, I can read, I can understand maybe not the whole thing but I can talk to you.”* The contrast between before he started and how the idea of reading poetry was intimidating for him but then it was different as he mentioned. In addition he felt the need to read more poems so he can better understand the new city as he said *“I want to know about everything about the new city, I think it will be more interesting with more than two poems.”* But one of the most important things he said is that he was able to express himself and to share his points of view.

Livia responded, in her reflection, to the idea that Dang raised about how news is used in his English class as a gate to know about culture. His point was that poetry has emotion that makes you able to reflect not like news which is only information with no emotions as he said *“They have emotions in the poems, in the news they do not have emotions. You can't reflect your attitude to them or reflect your emotions to them.”*

As a film making major, Dang discussed his experience in film classes when, in the classes they watched movies and discussed them trying to find out answers to questions that the movies raises to which the answer was never clear. He then said that reading poetry is different as the movie makes you listen and watch but poetry makes you read and maybe listen to yourself so as he said *“you know when you read, you can have your life in your head.”* He mentioned two crucial points; first is the multiple possible

interpretations which are a common between poetry and film, the second was the difference in the space left for imagination between poetry and film as he mentioned that you can have all your life in your head.

Eventually Dang talked about the improving his language by such experience as he said *“It can improve my reading skill and my listening skill and when we talk about it affects my speaking skill.”* and how poetry as a tool promotes culture as he explained *“I think literature can used for to promote Culture, like if you go to an attractive place you can put a poem just for one paragraph for people to read so they can feel harmonies. When you read a poem it is like you sing a song and it makes people feel comfortable.”*

### **Ana**

Ana is an exchange student from Germany. By the time of the study she has been in the new city for one month. Ana’s responses were mostly politically based which is pretty logical according to her study. Also as from Germany that is going through a lot of political issues at the time.

In reflection to the new city, Ana’s main concern was that some parts of the city seem dangerous as she said *“some parts of the city seem kinda dangerous.”* because of the homeless population. She compared this to her home city in Germany where it is not likely to see homeless people around the streets. It is important to say that one reason that almost every international student is aware of the homelessness problem in the new city is that they are always told about this in their orientation sessions. Some know from friends like Ana said *“a friend told me that he saw a homeless guy pointing with a gun to another homeless guy and he really shot.”*

She then talked about the difficulty in language and understanding people in daily life and inside the classroom as she said *“It is just kinda hard to understand people with Spanish accent specially when they speak fast Also in the university it is hard for me to understand some of the literature class because of the special terms, so it takes a long time to read it because I have to translate it.”* Her impression about people was more or less the same as everyone else; people are nice and always helpful. She related to her experience with her host family as she said *“they are so welcoming, I know that I can always come to their house.”*

### **Third meeting: Immigrants to Our Own Land**

Ana’s first impression of the poem is that the poem was negative. She also reflected to the formation of the poem as *“writing a dairy.”* She also said that she has read something like that before but the content was different. Not so long after, she talked about the main theme of the poem which is the American dream. In the first group, Livia and Dang talked about the same idea also claiming that people come to America with high expectations when they find the reality not likely the same. Ana also talked about the same topic, giving almost the same comment about expectations of immigrants as she said *“many immigrants have really high expectation” This gives me the impression that immigrants work in bad jobs try to survive.”* Then the discussion went deeper in the topic as we spent a bit of time discussing what is the American dream when she gave her own definition as getting a better Education and good job and *“is not about getting rich”* giving an example of her host family as she said *“they live the American Dream,”* explaining that they love their live and they seem happy so, maybe that is their dream.

Then she added a little modification to her definition of the American dream as it depends on “*depends on what your dream is, if you wanna become rich or you just wanna have a good job*”.

The idea of the American dream was repeatedly brought up and discussed during the interviews as it expresses the idea most people have about life in the United States. Ana, after the previous discussion, gave another interpretation to the poem that is connected to the current situation in her home country represented in the high rate of refugees who come to Germany from Syria as she reflected “*I connected to the situation in Europe now because so many people from Syria go to Europe because it is not safe anymore in their home country*”. She continued elaborating more about what she thinks of the situation and how this problem is bringing up again issues of racism in Europe. The connection came basically as she mentioned from her thinking that the refugees in Germany share the same feeling of fear as people in the poem. This is another good example of how cultural background gives people’s mind paths when it comes to responding to literature. It also shows the universality of literature, even though the poem was written for a specific purpose in the poets head, it is open to universal interpretation which gives a great value to text.

Ana picked the line “*Some will make it out of here with hate in their eyes*” as her favorite part of the poem because it is touchy and shows how immigrants are treated and what possible results is as she said “*Some might have potential but they feel mistreated and the government is not interested in them. They get angry and aggressive and not interested in working for this country anymore.*”

She eventually talked about the separation of different cultural group but in a slightly different way as she compared different social classes as she said “*different cultural groups are much separated and that immigrants come to low social class.*”

#### **Fourth meeting: Green Chili**

Ana’s first interpretation of the poem was direct as she said “*I think the green chili stands for the new city because when I came here everyone was just you have to eat green chili, it is so good, everybody eats it, everybody loves it so, it represents the way of life*”. She thought of it as symbol and as it is the most popular food that was recommended by everyone here. She then shared some of the popular food in Germany like the famous German bread and beer as she said “*Some parts of Germany specially in the south, in Bavaria, beer is considered kind of food, people drink it for breakfast ... Bread also, Germany has a really good bread. Here you can only buy toast and the bread is so soft. In Germany it is kind of healthy.*”

As Livia mentioned before the idea of memories attached to food, again Ana talked about it. She said that she remembered her memories with her grandmother when she used to cook to her some delicious food as she mentioned “*she made the best sausages and red cabbage. Hers is the best*”. Ana picked the same sentence in this poem as Livia, Dang and Bora “*relief this old ritual again and again*” which was really interesting. It shows how powerful and collective this sentence is as she explained “*I think the last sentence is quite important because he analyze the importance of this ritual I guess and the importance of this ritual and how people are connected to this. It tells that they are proud of their culture and tradition.*”

### **Fifth meeting: Reflection**

Ana said that she liked the whole experience and that she, in general, like to read and discuss literature to compare her point of view to other's points of view because as she said "*it is interesting to see how people understand thing*". Then she said that reading these poems made her think deeply about things and see things your life differently as she mentioned "*for example I went to old town and I saw all this green chili and I just said yea it is nice. I think now when I see this again, I will connect it to the poem and will think about the actual meaning this has to people and the tradition and the culture*". She continued to explain how she thinks it is awesome how these two poems made her think as she said "*it also changed my point of view about people here which is actually pretty awesome. You just read a poem and it makes you start to think about real big thing, the people and that is really cool.*"

She then said that that the discussion of poetry improves one's language by discussing words in the poem and that it opens new horizons and makes you see things as she summed up this "*I really like that poems are about the new city because better connect to them. It is just really good way to understand the culture better.*"

### **Dione**

Dione is an exchange student from France, by the time of the study; Dione has been in the new city for one month. Dione likes reading poetry and she is used to reading it, her discussions are all text based, she was curious about the text, the poet to be able to make her interpretations. Dione's first impression of the city was the feeling of insecure



because as she mentioned, she cannot enjoy her walk around here as she said *“three weeks ago I took the 66 bus on central and my first surprise was people on drugs, it was not really safe.”* Then she talked about the difference in culture between the new city and other states assuring that it is not a plastic America style as she explained *“it is not the plastic America like NY or CA, you can just live your life very easily but I do not know the city very well”*. She also likes the diversity in the new city society as she said *“like the city especially the melting pot.”*

Then she mentioned the language issue but she said it was not hard for her to speak because she doesn't meet people of campus and she hangs out with international students and French people so, no real difficulty.

### **Third meeting: Immigrants to Our Own Land**

In response to Immigrants to Our Own Land, Dione gave her first thought about the form of the poem and if she should consider it as a poem at all as she said *“do not know if I can consider this poem as a real poem because of the form”*. She said that it is more like a personal reflection the poet does. She sees it more as someone who expresses himself more that writing poetry which is close to Ana's idea about the dairy. Then she suggested that it might be that the poet does not want to put limits because as she said *“When you try to make rhythm in the poem, you put some limits.”*

Dione then talked about the overwhelming feeling in the poem and like Ana, she thinks it is a negative poem. She then connected it with another poem that she read about a poet writing her experience during the world war two that looked in form like this one as she said *“I read something similar to that. An informal poem of Anne Franc, she was a little*

*girl during the world war two and she wrote her feelings during the war.*” She then talked about how people in the poem make her feel that people here do not feel at home so they move to find a place for themselves which reminded me of Dang’s idea about American people being immigrants in their own land.

Then the topic of the American dream came up which, for Dione, is connected more the plastic style of America which doesn’t exist in the new city, so she doesn’t think the American dream is here as she said *“when we talk about the American dream, It is like in the Plastic USA like NY, CA because we know the new city, we can talk about the American Dream but Not here “and as her first visit to the United States was to New York, she said that during this visit she lived the American dream.*

Dione then had a question about the origin of Jimmy Santiago be able to link the poem to his life as she asked *“I do not know if there is a connection between the Immigration story and the poet’s or not? Because when we read that, it is my first question”* the connection that she was trying to make is that people from other origins find more difficulties than others. So if Jimmy is from a different origin, the connection would be obvious as she clarified *“. I think people who are not from here in the origins go through some difficulties to live easily.”*

After some minutes, Dione made a connection between the first paragraph of the poem especially the way it starts *““At the gates .....”* and the situation in long Island as she explained *“When I read the poem I thought about long Island, because of the condition there, when people want to enter in the US”*. But she had a self disconnection with the whole idea of immigration as she said she never experienced this back at her home town

so as she said *“I never felt this Idea of immigrant in my land and I never lived situations of trouble or doubt like people in the poem so, I can’t recognize myself in the poem.”*

Then she brought up the idea of separation between races that was mentioned in the poem referring to it as the *“current debate around the world”* and that there is a connection between race and achieving success as she said *“is not for everyone even if you try to fight for it, it is too hard to attain success”*. She then said that she thinks that the new city consists of many communities that keep themselves closed to people from the same racial and/or cultural background which as she said *“is funny because in the first activity I said it is good because it is a melting pot but now with the poem I understand that yea there is a melting pot but it is very specific.”*

#### **Fourth meeting: Green Chili**

Dione first impression of Green Chili is that it is easier than Immigrants to Our Own Land and that it doesn’t raise such a big question and that the atmosphere is totally different as she said *“I think that the feeling in this one is very different from the other gone”*. Like Ana and Livia, Dione also got the idea of memories attached to food as she said *“I think about memories and good moments with his grandmother and maybe green chili for him is a big part of his life”*. Also she thinks that the poem is a way to keep memories more than a poem about food. She then shared her grandmother memories that are related to food as she said *“my grandmother lived in the west coast and before when we went there; she prepared for us a cake with (Inaudible). Now when I eat this cake, I remember my childhood and my childhood house.”*

Dione picked the line *“her sacrifice to her little prince”* as she says it show the strong love between him and his mother. In general she thinks that the poem shows the costume and tradition of the new city as she said *“green chili is one of the most famous image of the new city, so it is a part if this city, it shows customs and traditions of them”* That is why at the end she said *“we can read more poems of Jimmy to know about the new city because it is very interesting.”*

### **Fifth meeting: Reflection**

Dione said that she enjoyed the experience and that it made her better understands the country as she said *“this experience made me realize and well understand the country, the new country or the new city”* and made her Change her mind and understands why she had a different idea in the first place. Then she mentioned that it improved her English and her reflection and that she enjoyed knowing other ideas as she said *“to confront my idea with other international peoples so it is a good experience.”*

Dione then talked about the importance of literature as she said it is a good way, in all language to improve your skills in the language giving an example of the French language *“if you want to improve your French, you go to read a book”*. Then she showed her interest in reading more of Jimmy’s poetry as she said *“I must confess that I will continue to learn about the new city with Jimmy Santiago. It is a good alternative to learn, to open my mind.”*

At the end of the discussion, Dione shared an example of how the poems changed her way of thinking about life in the new city; she mentioned how her judgment of people was wrong because she did know their story but now she knows it; she said *“The first one*

*made me say that my judgment about the people in the new city is very wrong you know because I do not know the story of them, now I know that all the people are not very well so that is maybe why there is a lot of poor people .. What I mean, yesterday when I went to fix my computer, I wasn't really scared in the bus because thanks to the poems."*

### **Categorization of Responses**

According to Beach (1993), response to literature is categorized according to the approaches which theorists adopt while analyzing these responses. He defined them as textual, experiential, cultural, social and psychological. I used the emphasis of each of these approaches as a typology to characterize all of the responses evoked by the two poems with this group of English language learners. The responses of Livia, Bora, Dang, Ana, and Dione vary but reflect all the categories delineated by Beach in his study of native language speakers' responses. In this section, I will discuss each category of response and how the five participants made meaning within each category. Hopefully, these analyses can illustrate how engaging English language learners in open-ended response to literature from the target language and culture enables them to rely on their existing knowledge, make personal connections, practice the target language, and learn about the culture.

#### **Textual Responses**

Participants' past textual experience influenced their understandings of both poems. All participants had some experience with poetry in their home countries. Our discussions over the poems were guided by some suggested questions that open the door

for textual response. For example; what else have you read that might be similar to this poem? And what is the most important word or sentence you find in the poems? Why? Let us see how these questions worked towards textual response.

Livia said she studied poetry back in high school in Brazil. She reported that she had studied several literary schools of thought, like romanticism and realism. Livia's poetry experiences influenced her interpretations and discussions in critical ways. For example, her first response to 'Immigrants to Our Own Land' was based on other poems she had read before about the northeast part of Brazil which, as she said, have the same theme of poverty. This experience helped her to pick words and lines from the text and relate it to the discussion. Moreover, she was able to open the topic of racism that was eventually taken up by her group. She began this conversation by reading aloud a line from the poem: "So we go about our business, blacks with blacks, poor whites with poor whites ...," read out loud and gave her interpretation. Also while asked to pick her favorite moment in the text, she used this experience and picked the sentence "but in the end, some will just sit around talking how good the old world was" which illustrates her general outtake from the poem.

Dang also shared his experience with poetry which was not as big as he said. He noted that he is not focused on poetry as he used to read it only as a school assignment. He also mentioned that the main aim of studying was to figure out the author's point of view of the poem. Dang also mentioned the difference in content between the poems he has read before and the poems we read together. In the discussion over 'Immigrants to our own Land' he said that most poetry in Thailand is written for women or written as motivation

for people to get better lives but in response to 'Green Chili' he said that he has read poems in Thailand about food that is prepared to the king.

In the reflection meeting, he talked about his experience with poetry that he gained from the study and compared it to his field of study which is filmmaking. He talked about the space poetry leave for your imagination while reading as he said that you can see your whole life while reading a poem which is different from watching a movie. Although Dang didn't have that much of an experience with poetry, he still was able to use this experience to relate the texts to his life and give some thorough interpretations. His response in general was more affected by his film experience. In his response to 'Green Chili', he based his discussion on his poetry experience telling the stories of preparing food to the king and how it is special.

Bora's response was one of the most surprising one's as she started her interpretation talking about poetry she studied South Korea. She mentioned that most poetry in being taught in Korea is about the Japanese colonization era and hoping for independence and then about the Korean war which was followed by poetry that documented the democratic era after this. Based on this experience was her response to 'Immigrants to our own land' as she interpreted the whole poem as a colonial poem; she said that the first impression she got from the poem was that the new city is an invaded land. This example applies what Richard Beach mentioned in his book (2005, P.27) as the rules of significance that the readers use to seek help understanding the text. Bora said that when she read the poem, the first thing she thought of was the homeless people she sees on the street just like most people who I read the poem with, but yet the significance of this

image was different as she reflected to these people as invaders and the new city as Invaded land.

Ana and Dione responded to 'Immigrants to Our Own Land's' form as they both thought that the poem doesn't look, in form, like a real poem. Ana said that it looks more like a dairy while Dione said that that it reminded her of some informal poetry she read before. She then suggested that the poet is trying to give himself freedom; because it is more limited to write with rhythm. Richard Beach (2005, p.33) talked about the how the reader responds to the form of the text when he cited Bruke's conception of work as: "Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires" which why the reader's response to form is crucial. In Ana and Dione cases, the feeling they got about the text as an informal free sort of poetry gave them the space for open and variable interpretation themselves.

### **Experiential response**

In 'Literature as Exploration' (1938) Rosenblatt argued that the special meanings and associations the reader will make through the text shows what this text communicates to him because the reader brings "personal traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition" to the text which in a large shapes the response (p.30). Based on Rosenblatt's transactional theory, theorists have concluded specific processes the reader goes through in his response experience. Some of these processes are "Engaging" which happened when the reader became emotionally connected to the text, "Imaging" which means the reader creates visual images, and "connecting" which is relating one's autobiographical



experiences to the text (Beach, 1993, p.52). In an attempt to address the experiential response, some of the suggested questions that participant read before the discussions were: What are your connections/ disconnections about the poems? And what questions does it raise for you? In the following paragraphs is how these questions worked.

Throughout the study, the participants interpreted the poems according to their past experiences and related in so many points to their personal lives. For instance, Livia talked about the life university students live in the new city compared to another life that they do not notice outside the university. She mentioned that she have not noticed that until when she started going out of campus walking to the drug store or somewhere close to the bus stations on Central Avenue. She also related her experience with the issue of separation between races and feeling safe around people from your own culture when she told the story of herself being inside a group of Brazilian students when she first arrived because she didn't feel confident enough with her language skills and cultural knowledge to get out of her comfort zone. These two examples show how Livia, in response to 'Immigrants to Our own land', connected between parts of the text and her own experiences in life. In her response to 'Green Chili', she went through the same process of "connecting" (Beach, 1993, p.52) when she said that the whole poem is about memories attached to food, and then she connected this to her own memories with food in her city in Brazil. Bora also referred to herself while discussing the same topic when she mentioned that she has eleven Korean friends that she stays close to.

Dang connected his personal knowledge of Thai immigrants to the United States to explain his understanding of the lifestyle of immigrants presented in the poem. He as well as Livia discussed the gap caused by media about life in the United States and how they

had this gap before reading the poems. Ana and Dione both related their personal knowledge to the poems; in response to ‘Immigrants to our own land,’ Ana connected the poem to situation of high rate of refugees moving to Germany while Dione pictured the immigration situation in long island. She said that when she read the first paragraph which starts with “At the gates ...” she thinks of people in long island because the situation is similar. In the previous example, Dione went through the process of “imaging” as she pictured the gates in the poem and connected them to the image she had in mind of long island (Beach, 1993, p.52). In addition, Dione related to her own story of living the American Dream when she first came to the United States in New York and how this is different from being in the new city. In response to ‘Green Chili’, they both interpreted the poem as a poem about memories more than about food which lead late to recalling their own memories with food that their grandmothers used to cook them and how they always remember their childhood when eating this food till now. These past examples of responses of the five participants show how interacting with the text helps understand and interpret the text in the way that connects to the reader as an individual.

### **Social response**

Richard Beach (2005) argued the influence of social roles in the response to literature by telling the story of his son discussing ‘Mushrooms’ with him. He said that the responses of both of them was highly affected by the social roles each of them play; parent, son, teacher, student, or researcher. Usually in the classroom setting the readers always perceive their role different from if they are reading a text outside the classroom setting; inside the classroom it is a student/ teacher interaction or a student/ student

interaction but outside the classroom the interaction takes a different direction depending on who and where and when. In my study, I tried from the first meeting to set in minds that our meetings are as casual as they can be; the reason was that I am interested to/ analyze the responses according to the social role of each participants outside any official research or classroom setting, these roles could be their work, their field of study, the social context where they came from, ...etc.

By revising the interviews' transcript, the social roles and the social contexts of the participant directed their response in specific ways. I will start this time with Dang whose responses were highly affected by his social role. As a filmmaker, his contributions to the discussions were affected by the nature of filmmaking. In other words, his interpretations were more cinematic than poetic; he created pictures and scenes all the time while commenting on a moment in the poem or while sharing a story. In response to 'Immigrants to our own land,' he was aware of the fact that the art work is open for various interpretations and that it is not likely to always have the same interpretation as everyone else so, he was open to give more than one interpretation to the poem in the same discussion. At the beginning, he said that the poem talks about the American dream, then not a long after that he said that this poem could be written to describe the life of Thai people as they immigrate to the United States. As the discussion progressed, he gave a whole different meaning to the poem when he said that immigrant people in the poem could be describing American people which show how he looked at the poem as a really open source of ideas to free interpretation. This approach is supposed to reflect an experience with poetry which Dang didn't really have as he disclosed, but he has a filmmaking experience which helped him deal with the poem the same way he deals with

movies. Another example is his favorite line in the poem which was “I sit down and see new immigrants coming in.” This sentence is one of those that describe movement, motion which is connected to his background in film.

As psychology major, Livia was influenced by her social role to the point that she analyzed her own responses. At the end of the study, during the reflection session, she explained why she thinks the whole experience of reading poetry was interesting as it enabled her to know more about people’s histories. She then elaborated that her interest in knowing about people’s histories through literature is because she is a psychology major. Ana as a political science major connected ‘Immigrants to our own land’ to the political situation in Germany. Another example is what five of them mentioned in the reflection meeting about how the study helps them improve their language skills. As exchange students in a native English speaking country, one of the major interests they have is how to improve their English, not to mention that two of them are in the United States to study English as a second language. Social roles are one of the most effective factors in shaping the reader’s response to literature, either the general role the reader plays in life or the roles that are generated in different contexts like a classroom, research group, book review sessions, ...etc.

### **Psychological response**

Beach argued that the psychological theorists of response assume that one’s responses are shaped by their level of cognitive or intellectual development (Beach, 1993). The importance of such knowledge of the level of cognitive development is to frame the responses of readers which help better understand the reasons why readers had such

responses. Beach then mentioned Appleyard model of development of response which defines five roles of readers according to their developmental level, these roles are: the reader as player, the reader as hero and heroine, the reader as thinker, the reader as interpreter, and the reader as pragmatic user of texts. In my study, I will focus on the last two roles because all my five participants were moving among these two roles.

According to Appleyard, the reader as interpreter happens during the last years of high school and the first years of college which is the age range of my participants. The feature of this role is that the reader thinks of the texts as problematic and requires interpretation and as “inviting multiple, often contradictory meanings” (Beach, 1993, p.74). The reader as a pragmatic user of texts is when the readers respond to texts according to their needs and interested. This role is when the reader in his or her adulthood and uses literature to “shape their own Adult life.” (Beach, 1993, p.75) Some suggested questions to approach psychological responses were: What did you notice in the poem? And what questions does it raise for you? The next examples show how they worked.

Throughout the study, my participants played both roles depending on the part of text they are commenting on and the ideas that are being discussed. As interpreters, they used their backgrounds and life experiences to suggest multiple interpretations for the poems. Playing the role of the pragmatic user, they related the poem to their own lives like Livia and Bora relating to their personal lives while talking about the separation between races, or what Dione shared about herself living the American Dream the first time she came to America. The importance of such theories is the ability to frame the responses of the

readers in a way that you can use this information to decide the type of questions you can ask and the topics you can discuss.

### **Cultural response**

Beach mentioned that cultural theorists focus on how “readers’ cultural roles, attitudes, and values, as well as the larger cultural, historical context, shape responses” (Beach, 1993, p.9). During the discussion, some of the suggested questions were offered to address the participants’ cultural response. These questions aimed to facilitate the process of cultural transfer between them and the texts. Some questions are: What are your connections/ disconnections about the poems? What impression of the new city did you get from reading the poems? And what do you think these poems tell about people in general and specifically life here in the new city? In response to the poems, participants shared a lot about their own cultures and reflected to the cultural content in the poems.

In response to ‘Immigrants to our own Land’, Livia and Dang talked about the cultural background they had about life in the United States in comparison to the one they found in the poem. Bora related what she read in the poem to the homeless population she sees around bus stations in the new city then compared it to the homelessness culture in South Korea when she illustrated that she doesn’t witness homeless people in the streets because the police is more strict in the matter. Dang did the same comparison when he said that homeless people in Thailand always do some activities like playing street music to ask for money which he did not see here. Ana and Dione also noted that they do not see homeless people in the streets as they came from small cities in Germany and France.

For green ‘Green Chili,’ all five of them shared the traditional food in their countries after discussing that green chili and red chili is the traditional food in the new city.

### **Applied literature; Language and Culture Sharing and Gaining**

In the past sections, I introduced the stories of the five participants neutrally; my aim was to give the real experience of what was said in the study with the time order of the meetings before I start analyzing their responses. I then used Beach’s theories of response to understand the reasons, motivations, frames, directions, and meanings of the responses in an attempt to identify the benefits participants have gained from getting exposed to this approach which I referred to as Applied Literature.

**Applied Literature is the interdisciplinary field of literature that investigates and offers solutions to real-life literature-related problems utilizing an interactive approach that helps the reader adopts the aesthetic stance which enhances the transaction between the reader and the text.** The term Applied literature was defined by graduate students in languages, linguistics, literature, and all forms of cultural studies at the University of Texas at Austin as a method “used in (usually foreign) language education; this method uses selected texts or textual excerpts in an original language to reinforce a cultural normative use of the language of study” (Texas theory wiki, 2010). Also the Canadian Applied Literature Association (CALA) which is an academic association committed to exploring the critical, activist, pedagogical, and therapeutic applications of literature and story decided that the association is “open to practitioners from any discipline fields including but not limited to literature, Indigenous studies, social work, psychology, and education.” (CALA, 2011) Based on Beach’s theories of

response which founded upon Rosenblatt's transactional theory and after going through this research study, the outcomes suggest that Applied Literature is able to contribute in solving problems in the field of second language learning.

This study is an attempt to address how Applied Literature can contribute filling the cultural gap that English as second language learners have. Being English as a second language learner/speaker who recently moved to the United States, Livia, Bora, Dang, Ana, and Dione noted the language difficulties they are facing during the first months of their stay as well as the cultural gap they have as new members in the society. Trough the study, participants have gained three main benefits: language skills improvement, culture enrichment and a self motivating experience.

Linguistic knowledge came from two different places, the first one was the text itself as it offered new and authentic language patterns, and the second place was the discussions over the text as it gave all of them an opportunity to practice their language skills and improve it. All five participants noted the language improvement they felt during the study. For example; Livia said "*it is an opportunity for us to practice our English because we are here to learn.*" Bora also mentioned that by reading poems and discussing it, her English skills were "*a bit enhanced*" as well as Dang who mentioned that literature can effectively improve his reading and listening skills and speaking skills through discussing it. Ana noted that poetry improves her language by discussing the words in the poem. Dione shared her view of literature as a tool for language learning when she said that literature is a good way to improve your language skills and this applies to all languages as she specified "if you want to improve your French, you go read a book."



Culture was being transferred in a two-way process between the participants and the text. In other words, the readers shared their culture through responding to the text and at the same time the text offered a virtual cultural experience. For example, Livia said that the poems helped her understand more about people in the new city and their culture as she said that the difference between before and after reading the poem is that now she has “*a deeper understanding in the new city.*” Dang suggested that literature can be used to “promote culture” as he shared his experience inside his English classes where they try to teach them about culture by reading news, but he thinks that literature is a better way because it carries emotions that you can reflect to and express yourself. Ana was deeply interested in the idea of how poetry was able to make her think deeply about normal things in life as she mentioned the example of her impression when she saw Green and red chili hanging in front of some houses in the Old Town in the new city, how she thought it is nice and how it will be different to see the same thing again after reading the poems as she knows the cultural value of it. She moreover assured that reading these two poems changed her point of view about people as said “*it is just a good way to understand the culture better.*” Dione also said that literature made her understand what she called “the new city” and made her change judgment about people here giving the example of her taking the bus after reading ‘Immigrants to our own land’ when she wasn’t scared like before because now she knows the stories of people.

The discussions around the poems shows how the approach followed in the study affected the attitude of the participants towards the concept of reading literature in general. Livia, Bora and Dang shared their past experiences with poetry stressing on how it was all about figuring out the authors point of view as Dang mentioned or dealing with

the poems as a one meaning text as Livia noted. After the study, Dang expressed that he thinks that English poetry is easier because he can share and express himself. The same thing was mentioned by Bora as a reflection on the study. Livia mentioned that it is interesting to discuss poetry and compare your opinion to other people's opinion. The same comment was also raised by Ana while reflecting on the study. As a way to express her reflection on the study, Dione said "*I must confess I will continue reading about the new city with Jimmy Santiago. It is a good alternative to learn, to open my mind.*"

### **Conclusion**

This study attempts to contribute to the empirical research in using literary text for language learning. Participants in the study were five English as second language speakers who recently moved to the Southwest and attending classes at a language center. Participants were asked to reflect to two local poems written by a local poet. Through the process of reading the poem, participants were guided to adopt the aesthetic stance that Rosenblatt defined. Adopting the aesthetic stance enabled participants to convey a wide range of responses. The responses suggest that literature, if approached in a way that enhances the transaction between the reader and the text by adopting the aesthetic stance, can contribute to the linguistic competence as well as the cultural understanding of language learners.

This study suggests that there may be more to the use of literature than just including works of literature into a second language curriculum. How teachers frame the reading of literature is equally important. By encouraging the aesthetic stance, or at least not inhibiting it, teachers can allow students to engage in a virtual experience of the target

culture. The open-ended nature of the prompts and discussion evoked a wide range of responses, indicating that participants could utilize their background knowledge and make connections in individual ways. The discussions allowed them to both use their existing target language skills and perhaps gain new skills in a supportive environment.

### **Implications**

In this study, Applied Literature attempts to offer a means for language learners to increase their cultural knowledge. Target language literature can offer experiential learning of the societal norms, ways of thinking, and language use through immersion in a virtual cultural experience. Participants can enter into the world created by the text through their own linguistic and cultural portals to make meaning. Students who are at approximately the same level of language development reported that the prompts opened up conversation, and that the process was valuable. One of the main goals of this study is to suggest other ideas about the potential usage of Applied Literature because I believe, based on the outcomes of the study that it is able to offer more contributions to different disciplines.

Researchers should consider more empirical research in the topics related to literature in general and in what is related to reader response theories specifically. This was a big research gap that I noted while going through the phase of literature review. Empirical research on second language learners' responses to literature can contribute to better understanding of multilingual experience and development. Additional qualitative and quantitative studies, with individuals and groups, can provide additional insight into second language development in particular age groups, in different settings, and with

different language backgrounds. People's responses to literature, after using an aesthetic stance to frame their reading, offer a viable window into second language learning.

Even though this study is small in scope, the richness of the participants' writing and discussion indicate the value of the aesthetic reading of literature. Other scholars have reported the effectiveness of literature as a medium for language and culture transfer like (Maley, 1989; Lazar, 1993; Liaw, 2001; Maley, 2001; Yusoff, Zillian, 2004; Pilar, 2007; Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011; Nodeh and Kiani, 2011). Teachers can support language learning by encouraging students to live through the events in a work of literature, to reflect on those events and the people involved using their own linguistic and cultural knowledge, to ask questions, and to thoughtfully consider the meaning of a work. Teachers can also take an expansive view of what counts as literature and encourage students to write about and discuss their responses to a wide range of texts using an aesthetic stance and include not only poetry, as was used in this study, but also stories, novels, memoir, film, television, and visual arts.

Literature can serve as a stimulus for talking about their own lives, the lives of those in the target culture, and the importance of the ideas presented. However, this can only be achieved through helping language teachers to understand the nature of reading and how students make meaning. If teachers know more about different theories of response, they can open up their assignments to provide students with opportunities for practicing and acquiring language in a thoughtful way. They also need training in how to conduct discussions about reading that provide students with a supportive environment in which their questions, observations, and level of language use is respected. And finally,

teachers need to learn how to use what students write and discuss as a window on their development.

It is also important for second language readers to be aware that there are different ways to frame their reading and to reflect on their process of reading. They should be aware of the difference between the aesthetic and the efferent stance and any other approach to reading literature so that they can decide which approach they want to use. This way the benefits readers can gain from reading literature can be boosted. Through a process of thoughtful, personal, reflective reading, literature indeed, as Lewis describes, “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it.”

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