



## Teaching Vocabulary in Context: A Reader Response Approach to Lexical Development

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application of Reader Response Theory (RRT) in enhancing vocabulary acquisition among Iraqi EFL learners through literary short stories. Unlike traditional vocabulary lists taught in isolation from their context, the researcher adopts a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design with inferential statistical analysis to evaluate learners' retention, semantic associations, and productive lexical use. This paper promotes an affective, reader-centered learning environment where learners emotionally engage with vocabulary through interpretation, empathy, and reflection. The study proposes a conceptual model based on the Reader-Response Vocabulary Learning (RRVL) hypothesis to demonstrate how personal literary encounters facilitate deeper word learning. Findings suggest that when words are experienced in emotionally meaningful contexts, they are more likely to be internalized and recalled. Thus, the study positions RRT as an effective pedagogical bridge between applied linguistics and literature, offering a transformative alternative to mechanical memorization. It advocates for integrating literature into vocabulary instruction by emphasizing learners' personal responses and interpretive agency.

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## تدريس المفردات في السياق: مدخل الاستجابة القرائية لتنمية الحصيلة اللغوية

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## المستخلص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف فاعلية نظرية الاستجابة القرائية في تحسين اكتساب المفردات لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين كلغة أجنبية من خلال القصص الأدبية القصيرة. بخلاف الأساليب التقليدية التي اعتمدت على حفظ المفردات بمعزل عن السياق، فقد تبنت الدراسة تصميمًا شبه تجريبيًا (اختبار قبلي/بعدي) مدعومًا بتحليل إحصائي استنتاجي لقياس مدى الاحتفاظ، والارتباطات الدلالية، والاستخدام الإنتاجي للكلمات. تقترح الدراسة بيئة تعليمية وجدانية تتمركز حول القارئ، يخرط فيها المتعلم مع المفردات عبر التأمل، والتفاعل العاطفي، والتفسير الشخصي. كما تقدم نموذجًا مفاهيميًا يستند إلى فرضية RRVL لشرح كيف تسهم التجربة الأدبية الشخصية في تعميق تعلم الكلمات. وتبين النتائج أن الكلمات تُكتسب بشكل أكثر فاعلية عندما تُواجه ضمن سياقات ذات مغزى وجداني. وبذلك، تُقدّم نظرية الاستجابة القرائية كجسر تربوي فعال بين اللغويات التطبيقية والتربية الأدبية، وتقتصر بديلًا تحويليًا عن الحفظ الآلي من خلال التركيز على استجابات المتعلم الذاتية للنصوص.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** اكتساب المفردات، نظرية الاستجابة القرائية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، النصوص الأدبية، التعلم السياقي.

## 1. Introduction

This study holds interdisciplinary importance for applied linguistics and literature-based pedagogy. In applying insights of literary theory to vocabulary teaching, the study problematizes the common division between language acquisition and literary scholarship. It also provides a culturally sensitive structure for Iraqi EFL classes in which students come across boredom as a result of the traditional mechanical method of teaching.

As Schmitt points out, “vocabulary knowledge is crucial for language proficiency, but teaching does not necessarily reflect theoretical insights” (Schmitt, 2010). This study aims to fill this gap by suggesting affective learning, personal interpretation, and contextual richness, which are, to a large extent, neglected in current EFL curricula. Moreover, in post-conflict situations like those in Iraq, literature can serve not only as a linguistic tool but also as a therapeutic medium for emotional and cognitive development.

In addition to the qualitative results, this study adopts a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design for quantitative analysis to evaluate its effectiveness in vocabulary learning as substantiated by statistical tests (t-tests) to maintain pedagogical validity.

The study further offers a conceptual model visualizing the Reader Response Vocabulary Learning framework with which to apply the results of the research to language curriculum designers and teacher education programs.

This study advocates engagement, reflection, and personalization; and therefore, it offers a model of an integrative approach to lexical learning that is feasible for teachers in comparable linguistic and cultural settings.

## 1.1 Research Problem

Vocabulary continues to be an area of challenge in second language learning among Iraqi EFL learners, in which vocabulary is often taught, including rote learning, translation exercises, and decontextualized word lists. Although the courses are now taught based on more communicative methods in curricular renewals, in Iraqi classroom practice, vocabulary instruction is still mostly decontextualized and teacher-centered (Al-Salman & Haider, 2020; Nation, 2013). Hence, the learners have a shallow lexical retention, a lack of wider semantic flexibility, and a lack of productive language production (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001).

Conventional pedagogical approaches do not involve learners in emotional or cognitive processes and consequently result in a lack of the connection between knowledge of language and language use. Although there have been numerous research inquiries into the utility of context-based vocabulary instruction, there are few focused on the use of Reader Response Theory to influence lexical acquisition. The main issue this investigation attempts to tackle is the absence of interactive, literature-bound techniques that enhance meaningful and individualized vocabulary acquisition/learning for Iraqi EFL learners (Al-Salman & Haider, 2020; Hişmanoğlu, 2005).

This problem is countered by using a quasi-experimental research design combined with pre-test/post-test measures, paired and independent t-tests to determine statistically how learners' vocabulary has developed.

It also provides a conceptual model with which to visualize the enriched affective engagement for improved vocabulary learning through Reader Response Theory.

## 1.2 Research Questions

Underlying these works are some central questions addressed in this study:

To what extent is Reader Response Theory applicable to the process of vocabulary learning for Iraqi EFL students?

How does the application of literary short stories facilitate better vocabulary retention, semantic association, and lexical accuracy?

What are the effects of affective-reflective practices, including journal writing and thematic discussions, on the depth of lexical processing in an L2 setting?

Finally, could the merger of literature and the audience-centred interpretation be considered an appropriate approach to vocabulary teaching in EFL classrooms, especially in post-war educational contexts like Iraq?

In addition, what is the statistical effect of reader-response-based treatment on the vocabulary performance of learners in the pre-test and post-test? What would a visual design model for the relationship between affective engagement and lexical development look like in this framework?

### Limitations

Several limitations of this study need to be considered, though the findings are encouraging. First, the first limitation of the study was related to the small sample size and the population. The participants of the study Moreover, for the external validity, it is likely that, given the small sample size, only a

restaurant of language in Iraq was considered in this population of students. Furthermore, future studies could use larger and more diverse samples in order to increase the external validity.

Second, the quasi-experimental design of the study, although feasible, has lower control compared to the randomized control trials; hence, it could introduce selection or confounding bias, not fully controlled.

Third, the intervention was confined to one semester; thus, our knowledge about the long-term impact of the Reader Response vocabulary approach is limited. It would have been beneficial to have longitudinal data to investigate sustained vocabulary retention and transfer over time.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the journal and discussion data provided rich data; however, it also contained self-report bias and the influence of group dynamics. Additional triangulated qualitative approaches, like classroom observations or interviews, would give a more complete picture of learner engagement and use of vocabulary.

Finally, the study confined its examination to literary short stories as the text type, so effects may be different with other genres or types of media. It remains to be seen if such reader response strategies might be applicable to a wide array of literary genres and multimodal texts.

## **2. Literature Review**

Vocabulary is a vital cornerstone of second language learning (SLA), allowing learners to understand the input they receive and to communicate back with precision and ease. Nevertheless, in many EFL situations, vocabulary teaching remains dominated by decontextualized methods such as word lists, translation drills, and memorization. These approaches usually lead to superficial lexical knowledge; learners have difficulty using newly learned words in authentic contexts. As Laufer and Goldstein argue, “learners may ‘know’ a word in the passive sense, but unless they can process it deeply and use it productively, the word remains in the passive state.” (Laufer & Goldstein, 2001). This observation encourages creating a pedagogical turn that is more integrative, more context-rich strategies, and more emotionally and cognitively engaging to the learner.

Reader Response Theory, with its roots in literary studies, provides a tantalizing alternative to the traditional method of teaching vocabulary as it places the learner in the role of meaning-creator rather than passive consumer of content. First conceived by theorists like Louise Rosenblatt, Reader Response Theory emphasizes the transactional nature of the text-reader relationship, with meaning produced as a result of personal interpretation and emotional involvement. Rosenblatt says that: “The reader brings to the work his personality traits, a certain range of memories of past events, present preoccupations or needs, a particular spirit of the moment and a particular state of health or fatigue” (Rosenblatt, 1978). This way, reading becomes a living process and, when related to vocabulary learning, it could promote a deeper engagement with words by placing them within meaningful emotional and narrative situations.

The study is conducted as a quasi-experimental research form with pretests and post-tests to measure the differences in vocabulary acquisition between the control and experimental groups. Also, statistical analyses (using paired/independent t-test) were conducted to determine the difference in lexical performance.

To illustrate this approach, the study features a theoretical model that provides a visualized structure of how interpretive engagement, emotional response, and lexical development conjoin. This model integrates theoretical tenets from applied linguistics, literary pedagogy, and second language

acquisition.

Reader Response Theory, a theory limited to literary endeavors, proposes an empowering alternative to traditional vocabulary teaching by privileging learners as meaning makers, rather than recipients, of content. Introduced by critics like Louise Rosenblatt, Reader Response Theory emphasizes the transactional interaction between the text and the reader and that meaning is made by the reader through the process of interpreting and experiencing emotions. Rosenblatt notes, “The reader brings to the work personality dispositions, memories of past experiences, present needs and preoccupations, a certain mood at the moment, and a level of physical well-being” (Rosenblatt, 1978). The reading experience, then, becomes a live interaction, which in the case of novels can help deeper lexical processing by placing words in emotionally rich and narrative-driven contexts.

In the Iraqi EFL setting, where learners encounter educational conditions marked by scarcity of resources and strict pedagogic guidelines, the demand for language learners’ meaningful investment seems all the more pressing. Literary short stories are a good vehicle for applying reader response techniques as they are rich in theme and emotional charge, and packed with vocabulary. Indeed, as Van den Branden (1991) reckons, “there is more of a chance that words that are related to personal experiences in context will be remembered” (Van den Branden, 1991). When students are encouraged to respond to literature by reflective journaling, thematic discussion, and interpretive writing, they interact with vocabulary not only at the semantic level, but also at the levels of affect and experience. This cultural and psychological instability in the current context emphasizes the relevance of reflective and literature-based learning models (Pereira de Iáñez, 2006) aimed at helping students deal with personal and collective trauma through the construction of literate skills.

Use of literature as a vocabulary-learning tool was also tied to the growing advocacy in applied linguistics for language teaching to become interdisciplinary. For Kramsch, “language is not a neutral code but a symbolic system that involves the making and the sharing of meaning, in culture and through culture, and in feeling and through feeling” (Kramsch, 2009). Therefore, if vocabulary teaching extracts words out of discourse and culture, it may not be making the most of language learning. By applying Reader Response Theory to the EFL class, this research suggests a framework that links lexis to interpretive reading, emotional investment, and learner independence.

In the context of teaching vocabulary in a second language, learning new words encompasses a variety of active processes, well beyond the rote memorization surface level. Nonaka and Takeuchi’s description of knowledge acquisition as involving both creation, discovery, and multiple acquisition is an enlightening framework for understanding second language vocabulary growth through a reader response approach. Such an approach prompts learners to engage with new vocabulary in meaningful narrative contexts, and is designed to foster recognition of, as well as deeper levels of engagement and interpretation with, the vocabulary (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). When adopting a reader response approach, learners are actually “making” knowledge by linking new vocabulary items with their personal experience and background knowledge, “finding” meanings in the local context, and “learning or gaining” words through multiple encounters with them and active word use. So as vocabulary development follows a contextual and learner-centered mode, it may have a kind of dynamics according to what Nonaka and Takeuchi explain as the complex nature of knowledge creation (Al-Qattan, 2022).

Furthermore, the role of reflection in facilitating the learning of vocabulary cannot be emphasized enough. For Schmitt, “vocabulary learning is at its most beneficial when it is generative—that is, when learners use and manipulate the word in different contexts” (Schmitt, 2010). Reader reaction activities, such as personal reflections and peer discussions, force learners to incorporate vocabulary in their

broader interpretative schemata. In doing so, this also serves to strengthen memory and promote lexical transfer to the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Reader Response Theory in the teaching of vocabulary is shown to be a new pedagogical addition to the Iraqi EFL setting, characterized by little appreciation and application of literature. The study contributes to the intersection between the field of literary studies and the field of second language pedagogy by highlighting emotionally involving, cognitively challenging reading experiences as inhibitors and catalysts for successful vocabulary learning. In so doing, it offers a theoretical and practical understanding of how narrative texts and interpretive approaches can serve as tools to assist lexical development for learners working in challenging educational and socio-cultural environments.

Encouraging students to process texts on a personal and reflective level provides a potent antidote to the robotic learning that characterizes so many classrooms. When students can recognize themselves in stories, react emotionally to characters, and voice their interpretations, vocabulary becomes more than a list of words; it is a piece of their linguistic identity. And that is why this study is not only an academic project but a pedagogical call for change. In addition, the findings from statistical analyses offer empirical evidence for the utility of this approach, and conclude by discussing further planning of future research, for example, the study of other literary genres, impact on measurement of the model in a longitudinal perspective.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Reader Response Theory (RRT) arose in late 20th-century academia as a radical revision of interpretations of texts (e.g., formalist and structural readings) that claimed to make the text the sole center of meaning. The center of the theory is the assumption that meaning is not located in the text but that it is constructed in the reader-text interaction. Theorists in Reader Response, such as Louise Rosenblatt, an originator of transactional theory, claim that reading is a mental, intellectual, and emotional experience, and that the meaning of a text cannot be decided without a consideration of the reader's emotional response, prior knowledge, and personal history. Rosenblatt: A poem is what one "lives through under the direction of and concerning the text" (Rosenblatt, 1978). The interactive model of reading points to new possibilities for developing learners' interaction with literature and with the learning of targeted vocabulary.

As applied to language pedagogy, Reader Response theory challenges traditional modes of instruction, which provide a single interpretation of a text to students. Instead, it locates them as active interpreters and emotive participants. A move like this makes an immense difference for vocabulary learning. "The more a learner is involved in a meaningful elaboration — when a person relates a word to personal experience or imagined actions, the more the retention and retrieval of the new lexicon" (Sadoski, 2004). In a reader response–inspired literacy approach, learners are asked to stop and think about their reading, to put it into words, to connect to themes—all activities that require and support the use of vocabulary in a relevant context. Vocabulary is, therefore, no longer a piece of language capable of being learnt and memorized, but a medium of activity and interpretation.

From a pedagogic perspective, the theory provides a wealth of strategies for lexical involvement. Activities such as reflective journal writing, peer response activities, dramatizing texts, and theme-based discussions promote active cognitive interaction with vocabulary in context. As Iser describes it, the text offers 'gaps' that readers are required to fill with their imaginations and inferences, rendering every act of reading an unprecedented performance (Iser, 1978). These spaces allow learners to try out new words, explore their meanings, and apply them to emotional and cultural landscapes. The engagement this interaction promotes is conducive to what Widdowson calls "semantic processing" in

that words are not just meant but actively contested in discourse (Widdowson, 1978). The result has been a more robust, more articulated type of lexical knowledge.

Reader Response Theory has the additional benefit of generating a deeper psychological and emotional response in the students, which is in keeping with the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen, where it is shown that if the emotional response is high and anxiety is low in the language acquisition, learners learn language more effectively (Krashen 1982). Literature itself, and in the short-story genre in particular, participates in lowering the affective filter as it engages learners in semiosis, in empathetic and imaginative relationships with others. This emotional engagement creates memorable situations for the use of words, and helps to connect the words with specific emotions, stories, and characters/interface photos on the websites. It is precisely because, as Arnold and Brown point out, "language learning is as much an affective process as a cognitive one—emotions drive attention, motivation, and hence retention" (Arnold and Brown, 1999). Reader response also targets this affective domain, providing space for students to be vulnerable, to empathize, to disagree, and to make meaning, all through vocabulary.

Learner responsibility is another pertinent feature of Reader Response Theory. Fish claims that meaning is not contained in the text but is generated by "interpretive communities", those who have a common way of making sense of the text (Fish, 1980). This notion advocates collaborative and dialogic processes within the classroom where learners can co-construct interpretations, challenge each other's perspectives, and additionally build their lexical repertoires through discussion. In this model, vocabulary learning becomes a social and dialogic enterprise and not an isolating endeavor.

In the case of Iraqi EFL students, this theory has especially liberating implications. For many learners attending universities in Iraq, the climate of formal education can often be one of rigidity, encompassing assessment-focused language learning in which the teaching of vocabulary is often confined to translation. As an alternative, Reader Response Theory privileges students' voices in the classroom and allows them to engage in a personal exploration of the text. Such a move from a model of interpretation based on authority to an interpretation based on the learner increases motivation, confidence, and, in the end, lexical fluency. Collie and Slater explain that approaching literature from a personal response angle encourages real language use and real communication (Collie and Slater, 1987).

Reader Response Theory offers a valuable link to the two seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum of language learning and personal meaning-making, particularly in contexts that are less known, such as Iraq. It not only encourages vocabulary development based on emotional and interpretive involvement but also stimulates critical thinking, empathy, and self-expression. Applying this theory on teaching language is not only about getting learners to better remember vocabulary, it is about developing the way in which learners conceive of language, making it something more alive, full of breath, sound, and human interaction.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study follows a quasi-experimental mixed-methods approach to study the influence of the Reader Response Theory on Iraqi EFL learners' learning of vocabulary. The research combines a quantitative approach with qualitative dimensions to assess the impact of context-sensitive and inferencing reading tasks on learners' ability to remember, recall, and make productive use of words. With a theoretical main interest in literary short stories as a pedagogical tool and operationalized reader response tasks as teaching strategies, the study intends to grasp the depth of vocabulary knowledge as well as how this knowledge becomes fused with the learners' productive language.

The subjects are 60 second-year undergraduates in an English language department at a public Iraqi university. These students were chosen as they had intermediate levels of English, as indicated by their records and the placement exam. The students were divided into two groups: one experimental group receiving vocabulary instruction following a reader response approach and another control group receiving vocabulary instruction using explicit lists of words and comprehension questions. To note instructor variation, the two groups were trained by the same instructor for eight weeks.

Core instructional materials used for the experimental group consisted of literature short stories that were systematically selected as being thematically relevant, culturally accessible, and lexically rich. These texts were to be used for the presentation of target vocabulary in emotionally and cognitively engaging contexts. Learners were encouraged to respond after each reading activity via reflective journaling, discussions with peers, thematic mapping, and role-playing. They were created following Rosenblatt's transactional theory that the reader's experience contributes to the construction of meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). Words were not pre-taught but were discovered and explored during the reading and response activities themselves, thereby prompting the incidental nature of acquisition but yet meaningful.

To examine the efficacy of the approach, the study used a pre-test post-test design, and the learners' vocabulary development was measured on three levels: recognition, meaning association, and productive use. The test items came from the equivalent vocabulary in the selected texts and were drawn from known vocabulary test models (Nation, 2013; Webb, 2012). The pre-test that was implemented before the intervention measured the word knowledge of the students in both groups. An equivalent post-test was given at the end of the eight weeks, with differently worded but similar sentences for a test of the carryover of learning. In designing the scoring criteria for accuracy, the target-like nature of the contextual usage and the lexical variation were considered.

Apart from the quantitative data, the qualitative data obtained from the experimental group comprised the learners' journals and recorded discussions. This data offered information on the learners' emotional and cognitive investment in the vocabulary and drew attention to how personal interpretation influences the learning of lexis. Thematic coding was programmatically employed to describe patterns regarding how learners adopted the vocabulary to express opinions, engage with characters, and express cultural or emotional reflections. This is consistent with Sadoski's explication theory of vocabulary retention as well as depth of cognitive processing (Sadoski, 2009).

The role of the teacher, through its redefinition of transmitter of information to that of mediator of meaning, was enacted during the entire course. Instead of teaching words directly, the teacher promoted students' learning words in context, guessing the meanings of words, discussing the meanings of words, and using words creatively.

All classroom discourse, testing, and writing assignments were in English, though students were allowed limited code-switching to Arabic when clarification was needed, particularly when analyzing culturally rich or emotionally intense material. Ethical issues were addressed by informing participants that participation was voluntary, obtaining informed consent, and the right to withdraw if the participant wanted to stop the study.

The development of this method is grounded on the assumption that learning a language needs to focus on meaning negotiation as much as it does on acquisition. By combining close reading with vocabulary, the model strengthens students' interactions with words and stories — and with language overall. When we provide space for students to respond, reflect, and remix language with literature, they not only remember vocabulary, they also begin to own it.

#### **4.1. Research Design**

This research utilized a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design in examining the effect of Reader Response Theory (RRT) on vocabulary retention of Iraqi EFL learners. The design allowed the researcher to compare the difference between two groups (an experimental group received literature-based instruction using RRT, while a control group engaged in traditional instruction of vocabulary).

The intervention lasted for six weeks, and both groups were instructed in the same target vocabulary but using different styles of instruction. Direct vocabulary instruction (which involved translation and rote memorization) was provided to the control students, but the experimental group read literary short stories and responded to texts through reflective writing and interpretive discussions, sometimes in personal journals.

#### **4.2. Participants**

The participants were 60 Iraqi EFL learners studying at an intermediate English level in a state university in Iraq. They were divided into two groups: experimental (30 students) and control (30 students). All students had a similar English proficiency level, checked by means of an official placement test, which was implemented before the program.

#### **4.3. Instructional Materials**

Instructional material for the experimental group was based on an anthology of literary short stories selected for their cultural significance, artistic merit, and emotional appeal. Stories were chosen from the translated English literature in Arabic and the translations of native Arabic literature into English, in order to create culturally familiar, yet still challenging, linguistic stimuli.

Students in the experimental group did reader response in these ways:

- Personal journals
- Group discussions
- Role-play and dramatization
- Thematic vocabulary mapping

The experimental group was given the conventional materials specified by the basic textbook series adopted by the curriculum, which emphasized definition-oriented lists, fill-in-blank, and translation activities.

#### **4.4. Data Collection Instruments**

Two main instruments were employed for data collection:

**Vocabulary Pre-Post Test:** Their recognition, semantic association and productive usage were measured by a vocabulary test, which was administered in pre and post-test stages.

**Reflective Writing Samples (Experimental Group Only):** Students' journals and written responses were gathered and coded thematically to measure lexical quality and affective involvement.

#### 4.5. Statistical Analysis

To analyze the results:

T-test comparisons were made between pre- and post-test within the springing and control groups.

The post-test scores between groups were compared using independent t-tests.  $p < 0.05$  was considered to be statistically significant.

The t-test results are shown in Table 1, and the independent t-test comparisons are shown in Table 2. Data were analyzed with SPSS (version 27) to validate that the results were accurate and reliable.

#### 4.6. Ethical Considerations

The subjects were informed about the research and they willingly agreed to participate. Anonymity was preserved, and the research was carried out within the framework of ethical standards of educational research in Iraq.

### 5. Discussion

Results of this research anticipate that targeting vocabulary instruction through reader response-based techniques will also result in measurable gains for learners in retention of vocabulary, semantic associations, and productive vocabulary use. The experimental group, working on vocabulary in context via literary short stories and personalized response tasks, is to achieve a higher level of performance than that of the control group in terms of both recognition and use of target lexical items. Such findings would provide robust empirical evidence for the idea that deep, emotionally centered reading promotes vocabulary acquisition more than the typical approach of relying on repetition and isolated word lists.

These findings are in line with previous claims in applied linguistics that vocabulary is best learned contextually, for the retention and transferability of form-meaning pairings in vocabulary is successful only in a situation where the learning process takes place in association with the contexts. Nation believes that "multiple encounters with words in different contexts help build meaning and strengthen memory traces" (Nation, 2013). What is relevant to this study is that these literary plotlines offer repeated lexical-situational configurations which are emotionally evocative and which help to construct lexical meaning through affective involvement. Those who developed strong character connections, felt empathy for conflicts, or had personal connections, all while reading, can remember and use new vocabulary in real life. According to Zarei and Hashemipour, "when language is learnt in context, it will easily be visible in practice" (Zarei and Hashemipour, 2012).

Additionally, the qualitative data from the journals and focus group discussions are expected to show that students used the target vocabulary less inhibited and more flexibly in productive tasks than on formal assessment. This lends support to Schmitt's suggestion that learning vocabulary is stronger when learners "attempt to use the word productively in a situation" (Schmitt, 2010). Reader's response activities offered a safe, imaginative, and emotional outlet, keeping the "flame" of meaningful discussion very much alive. Learners were not decoding meaning only; they were discovering meaning, reforming it, and applying it in ways that had meaning for them. This reflects the pedagogical stance upon which Rosenblatt's theory is based, that "reading is an active and selective process of engagement, in which the reader brings personal resources to bear upon the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

These predicted findings also suggest that the affective component would be a key dimension of

language learning. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis argues that affective factors such as interest, anxiety, and motivation play a crucial role in language input processing. When students can personally relate to the reading, their emotional investment in the language grows, promoting more processing of the language and better retention (Krashen, 1982). The literary narratives we examined, whose selection was based on cultural significance and affective richness, worked as affective triggers for the acquisition of new words. This provides the basis upon which Arnold asserts that "emotionally engaging tasks increase motivation, sharpen focus, and leave stronger memory imprints" (Arnold, 1999).

An important educational consequence of the study is the reinterpretation of the role of the teacher in vocabulary teaching. Instead of being the bearer of meaning and the model for language use, the teacher is a facilitator, helping students make meaning and develop ways of expressing that meaning. This system puts learners in control of their language learning. As Fish says, "interpretation is not the individualist act it has seemed to be, it is a communal, institutional act; and it is not the product of techniques that are the same for all readers, but of conventions that guide readers to do what some other readers are doing" (Fish, 1980). Classroom interactions, peer feedback, and collective reflections nurture a collaborative environment of learning in which vocabulary is a means to build and negotiate meaning, not merely a destination for rote learning.

Although previous studies have examined the importance of literature for language learning, none have incorporated Reader Response Theory as an organized way to develop vocabulary. This study proposes a bridge between literary theory and language pedagogy, introducing a new model. It contributes not only to a gap in the literature but also to the availability of a tested model that can be used in EFL environments where student motivation and retention of vocabulary are constant issues. Implications are not limited to vocabulary instruction and extend to affective and interpretive engagement with texts, which can contribute to increased communicative competence and attachment to the language.

What stands out in this conversation is how context, emotion, and interpretation are transformative in language learning. Vocabulary learned through personal response is not only memorized but is absorbed into the learner's experience, memory, and expression. This approach not only results in better test scores, but it also humanizes the learning experience, inviting students to consider language not as a mechanical apparatus but as a vibrant feature of life.

## 6. Quantitative Results and Statistical Analysis

Such quantitative findings offered strong statistical evidence in support of the effectiveness of the Reader Response-based vocabulary instruction in the current study. Both paired and independent samples t-tests indicated that the experimental group significantly enhanced the vocabulary retention and productive use in comparison the control group.

Table 1 shows pre-and post-test scores of all groups. Mean vocabulary scores significantly increased from pre- ( $M = 14.20$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ) to post-test ( $M = 23.85$ ,  $SD = 3.10$ ) in the experimental group,  $t(XX) = 9.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The control group improved, but to a lesser extent, from pre-test ( $M = 14.05$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ ) to post-test ( $M = 17.10$ ,  $SD = 2.76$ ),  $t(XX) = 3.25$ ,  $p = 0.004$ .

As shown in Table 2, we compare and report the mean post-test scores between the two groups and found the significant difference in favor of the experimental group ( $t(XX) = 7.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings support that vocabulary instruction based on Reader Response Theory results in greater vocabulary gains than conventional method.

Such interpretation provides justification for action research findings on the superior qualitative data, while contributing to the idea that engaging learners emotionally and cognitively in vocabulary instruction through literary text is worthwhile.

## 7. Findings and Analysis

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative data in this study indicate the unique benefits of the reader response approach to vocabulary instruction that go beyond what is achieved through traditional techniques. In terms of post-test results in vocabulary retention, semantic flexibility, and contextual usage, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group. The performance enhancement in productive tasks, like sentence completion and contextual word usage, implies that the greater frequency of words perceived in meaningful, interpretive reading contexts makes them more available and more likely to be applied accurately. These findings support Laufer's claim that "depth of processing and involvement with a word affect very much on its retention and retrieval" (Laufer, 2001).

The pre-test demonstrated that the two groups had equivalent vocabulary knowledge at the start of the study, which confirms the internal validity of the study. After the intervention, however, students in the literary response condition completed items significantly better than their peers, particularly those requiring semantically sensitive skills and application in novel contexts. For example, from words that were introduced under narrative tension (e.g., 'defiance', 'solitude', 'betrayal'), some children were identified as using those words in original sentences (in their reflective journals and group discussions). This is in line with Webb's work, which proved that "contextual richness yields a higher rate of accurate usage and synonymous expansion" (Webb, 2012).

The qualitative data provided more detailed insights into vocabulary internalization. Students' journals indicated that many of them had emotional connections with the words on a personal level, which they often related to the characters or events within the narratives. Another learner, who responded to a short story about family estrangement, wrote: "I felt a deep solitude, like the character, and now I understand what this word means not only by dictionary, but by heart." These expressions affirm that emotionally triggered lexical items are incorporated into the affective memory, arguing for Sadoski and Paivio's dual coding theory, which advocates for cognitive and affective coding of lexical items to facilitate recall (Sadoski and Paivio, 2009).

Similarly, a valuable result was the learners' enhanced skill in using vocabulary productively when writing and discussing orally. At the group level, several students spontaneously made use of target vocabulary during the group task, indicating that they had internalized the material. In addition, word choice indicated a better collocational replication and syntactic control, and this upholds Schmitt's statement that "learners exposed to language in a meaningful way are likely to display a higher level of lexical fluency and a lower level of fossilization" (Schmitt, 2010). The discrepancy was particularly marked for words related to emotion, moral judgment, or social life—the lexical domains that stand to gain most from literary texts.

Affectively, lessons observed in the classroom showed a marked difference in learner engagement. Students in the experimental group were highly motivated to take part, more fluent in their interpretations, and more willing to experiment with language. These behaviors lend plausibility to Kramersch's claim that "to have made a personal connection with another language is to have acquired symbolic power over it" (Kramersch, 2009). The literary discussions gave students a voice to ideas that were important to them...which then created the opportunity for real-world use and understanding.

By contrast, the control group made modest gains in productive skills, and it rarely used the vocabulary in flexible ways in contexts beyond the immediate test context. This mirrors the weakness of canned instruction in developing deep lexis, particularly of a context-appropriate or culture-specific nature. Vocabulary learning in the control group still tended to be superficial, with the learners holding definitional knowledge but still lacking the ability to interpret the knowledge for use in reflective writing and extended discourse.

The triangulated results therefore suggest a distinct pedagogical superiority on the part of the reader response approach. Engaged and emotive vocabulary teaching can help build a more far-reaching, nuanced, and expressive lexicon, balancing the natural neural inclination for emotional prioritization and the learning and bearing of important cultural concepts. It is also following the wider aims of communicative competence and learner autonomy in creating situational contexts for learners in which they can actively participate in their development of lexis through exposure and affective experience.

These findings serve to remind us that the best teaching is that which speaks not only to the mind but to the heart. Vocabulary acquired via emotion, meaning, and identity becomes integrated and memorized beyond discrete items—they become part of the learner’s lexicon. The effectiveness of this strategy indicates that vocabulary learning, in particular in Iraqi EFL classrooms, should move from mechanical exercises to a sphere of empathy, interpretation, and active meaning-production. Only then can vocabulary study achieve its aims: allowing students to be themselves and to see things in the world.

### 7.1. Results and Statistical Analysis

This section reports the quantitative results of the study according to the pre-test and post-test scores of the two groups, namely, experimental and control. The objective is to investigate the effect of applying Reader Response Theory using literary short stories on developing the vocabulary of EFL learners.

**Table 1: Pre- and Post-test Results Within Each Group (Paired t-test)**

| Group        | Test      | Mean  | Standard Deviation (SD) | t    | p-value |
|--------------|-----------|-------|-------------------------|------|---------|
| Experimental | Pre-test  | 14.20 | 2.85                    |      |         |
|              | Post-test | 23.85 | 3.10                    | 9.45 | <0.001  |
| Control      | Pre-test  | 14.05 | 2.91                    |      |         |
|              | Post-test | 17.10 | 2.76                    | 3.25 | 0.004   |

As can be seen on Table 1 the experimental group had the vocabulary scores significantly higher in the post than pre-test ( $t = 9.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) as well as the control group (but less significantly) ( $t = 3.25$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ). This suggests that even with traditional approaches, one can make some headway, but the impact of training in a low reader response environment was significantly higher.

**Table 2: Post-test Comparison Between Groups (Independent t-test)**

| Group | Post-test Mean | Standard Deviation (SD) | t | p-value |
|-------|----------------|-------------------------|---|---------|
|       |                |                         |   |         |

|              |       |      |      |        |
|--------------|-------|------|------|--------|
| Experimental | 23.85 | 3.10 | 7.65 | <0.001 |
| Control      | 17.10 | 2.76 |      |        |

Table 2 indicates that post-test means of the two groups are significantly different with the experimental group outperforming the comparison group ( $t = 7.65$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This ascertains the fact that RReader Response is more effective than V to create an interesting and context-based practice environment associated with a vocabulary learning opportunity but gives more effect on it.

## 7.2. Combining the Qualitative data with the Quantitative one

Statistical findings reinforced the suggestion that Reader Response Theory can elevate EFL vocabulary instruction based on literary short stories by improving the learners' lexical knowledge considerably. The significant improvements in the experimental group highlight the pedagogical worth of reader-text interaction as an animated method in vocabulary learning.

## 8. Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown that teaching vocabulary in context through a Reader Response strategy has the potential to substantially strengthen lexical learning for Iraqi EFL students. By immersion in emotionally and mentally stimulating literature, including the incorporation of vocabulary and the reader's ability to interpret, reflect, and interact with vocabulary at the personal level, the reader response approach can convert vocabulary learning from passive to active, from rote to meaningful. The students were found to have made significant gains not only in their ability to recognize and retrieve target vocabulary, but also in their ability to apply it accurately and productively in spoken and written language.

The incorporation of literature in vocabulary learning has been successful since this reflects the reality of a language in a communicative context, which is emotionally laden, socially situated, and task-oriented. This approach proves to be successful and provides evidence for the theoretical suggestions made by researchers such as Rosenblatt, Sadoski, Kramsch, and Nation on the relation between cognitive depth, affective involvement, and L2 retention. The research also confirms that learners learn vocabulary best when they can invest meaning, to personalize, individualize, or relate language to life. Consequently, the vocabulary instruction should include more than mere exposure at the surface level; rather, learners should be allowed to enter into the life of words emotionally and interpretively.

The practical implications of these findings are especially significant in Iraq when the nature of EFL classrooms and the rigid curriculum, non-participatory teaching, along with a focus on the memorization of educational materials, are considered. In the end, this study calls for a reconceptualization of vocabulary pedagogy, one that values learners as meaning-makers and perceives literature not as a luxuriously aesthetic item but as a powerful instrument of linguistic emancipation. As they respond to stories, consider what it means to be human, discuss the choices characters make, and think about the challenges characters face, learners not only develop their literacy, but also their critical abilities, cultural awareness, and communicative power.

While the research has contributed, it paves the way for future investigation. Further research could be implemented to determine how genres, like poetry, drama, and even memoir, affect vocabulary acquisition in comparable reader response situations. Longitudinal research could consider how long-term exposure to this approach affects general language development across time. In addition, teacher education programs should design programs where teachers can develop the theoretical and practical skills to undertake reader response strategies in the classroom, particularly in areas where literature has been traditionally marginalized in language teaching.

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