The Aesthetic Transaction in L2 Literary Reading: Self-Involvement and Literary Judgment among Malaysian Student Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the aesthetic transaction between Malaysian TESL student teachers (N=20) and English literary texts, focusing on self-involvement and literary judgment as manifestations of aesthetic reading. Grounded in Rosenblatt's transactional theory, the research employed a mixed-methods approach combining the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ) with qualitative analysis of written responses to a culturally resonant Malaysian short story. Findings revealed that student teachers demonstrated strong aesthetic reading orientations, with Literary Judgment (28%) and Self-Involvement (19%) emerging as significant response types. Literary Judgment responses showed participants' capacity to recognise and appreciate stylistic features, particularly foregrounded language devices. Self-Involvement responses reflected emotional projection and personal connections, drawing on culturally familiar themes, especially family relationships and loss. The study validates the importance of culturally resonant texts in L2 literature pedagogy and highlights the pedagogical value of validating both evaluative and emotional reading responses in TESL teacher education.

Keywords: aesthetic reading, transactional theory, reader response, literary judgment, self-involvement, TESL education

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyse how Literary Judgment responses demonstrate Malaysian TESL student teachers' capacity to recognise and appreciate stylistic features and foregrounding devices in literary texts.

2. To explore the nature of Self-Involvement responses, particularly focusing on emotional projection and personal connections with textual themes among Malaysian TESL student teachers.

Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Literary Judgment responses reflect Malaysian TESL student teachers' awareness and appreciation of stylistic features and foregrounding devices in literary texts?

RQ2: What patterns of emotional projection and personal connection characterise Self-Involvement responses among Malaysian TESL student teachers?

INTRODUCTION

Literature instruction in second language (L2) contexts grapples with a fundamental tension: balancing linguistic development with aesthetic appreciation. Traditional approaches often privilege efferent reading—reading for information extraction—at the expense of aesthetic reading, which emphasises lived-through experience, emotional engagement, and personal meaning-making. This imbalance is particularly problematic in TESL teacher education, where future educators require both literary analysis proficiency and personal aesthetic engagement to effectively model and cultivate literary appreciation among their students.

In Malaysian TESL contexts, where English functions as a second language and literature serves multiple pedagogical purposes—language development, cultivation of critical thinking, and cultural literacy—the need to understand how student teachers engage with literary texts becomes especially pressing. Despite extensive research on reader-response theory in Western contexts, empirical studies examining Malaysian TESL student teachers' literary reading experiences remain limited, creating a significant gap in our understanding of how these future educators engage with English literature.

This study addresses this gap by examining two specific manifestations of aesthetic reading among Malaysian TESL student teachers: self-involvement and literary judgment. Self-involvement refers to instances in which readers emotionally identify with characters, situations, or themes, projecting their personal experiences onto the text. Literary judgment encompasses readers' evaluative commentary on textual features—assessments of narrative craft, stylistic choices, and overall literary quality. Together, these response types provide insight into the aesthetic dimension of L2 literary reading.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory (1978; 1994) fundamentally reconceptualised the reading process by positioning meaning as emergent from the transaction between reader and text, rather than as a fixed entity residing within the text itself. Central to this theory is the distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading stances. The efferent stance directs attention outward, toward information to be retained after reading; the aesthetic stance directs attention inward, toward the lived-through experience during reading—the sounds, rhythms, images, associations, and feelings evoked by the words.

The aesthetic stance is not simply a passive absorption of textual content but an active, selective process wherein readers attend to the emotional, sensory, and imaginative dimensions evoked during reading. Aesthetic reading, in Rosenblatt's formulation, is inherently transactional: it involves the reader's selection from a reservoir of past experiences, present concerns, and linguistic competencies, which shape the particular 'poem'—Rosenblatt's term for the lived-through experience—that emerges from encountering the text.

Self-Involvement in Literary Response

Self-involvement represents one of the most direct manifestations of aesthetic reading. Defined as instances in which readers emotionally identify with characters, situations, or themes, self-involvement signals the collapse of aesthetic distance—the reader does not merely observe the narrative world but participates imaginatively in it. Beach (1993) characterises self-involved responses as marked by first-person pronouns, expressions of emotional identification, and references to the reader's own life circumstances in relation to textual content.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that self-involved responses often emerge when textual content resonates with readers' personal experiences or cultural backgrounds. Sipe (2008) found that elementary students frequently inserted themselves into narrative worlds, projecting their emotions and experiences onto characters. Larsen, László, and Seilman (1991) documented how specific textual passages triggered autobiographical memories, with readers spontaneously connecting literary events to personal experiences.

In L2 contexts, self-involvement assumes particular significance. Hanauer (2001) argues that personal engagement with literary texts can mitigate the linguistic challenges L2 readers face, as emotional resonance sustains attention and motivation even when linguistic processing is demanding. Carlisle (2000) similarly notes that L2 learners who forge personal connections with texts demonstrate greater persistence and deeper comprehension.

Literary Judgment and Stylistic Awareness

Literary judgment encompasses readers' evaluative commentary on textual features—assessments of narrative craft, stylistic choices, thematic development, and overall literary quality. Unlike interpretive responses, which

focus on meaning construction, literary judgment responses attend to how texts achieve their effects through specific linguistic and structural devices.

Foregrounding theory (Miall and Kuiken 1994) provides a crucial link between textual features and literary judgment. Foregrounding—the stylistic deviation from linguistic norms through devices like metaphor, unusual syntax, or phonological patterns—draws readers' attention to language itself, prompting metalinguistic awareness. Miall and Kuiken's empirical studies demonstrated that foregrounded passages slow reading, increase affective response, and stimulate interpretive effort, suggesting that stylistic distinctiveness triggers both emotional and evaluative engagement.

For student teachers, literary judgment holds particular pedagogical significance. The capacity to recognise and evaluate literary techniques directly informs instructional practice: teachers who appreciate narrative craft can more effectively scaffold students' stylistic awareness. Sigvardsson (2020) found that student teachers who themselves engaged aesthetically with poetry demonstrated richer pedagogical repertoires for teaching verse.

Literary Reading in Malaysian TESL Contexts

Malaysian literature education operates within a complex sociolinguistic landscape where English functions as a second language but also serves as a primary medium for academic and professional communication. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 emphasises literature's role in developing critical thinking and cultural understanding, reflecting longstanding policy recognition of literature's pedagogical value (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia 2017).

Despite policy-level recognition of literature's role in fostering critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation, pedagogical practice often remains teacher-centred and exam-oriented. Studies consistently document transmission-model instruction, where teachers focus on plot summaries and character identification rather than personal response or aesthetic engagement (Rosli Talif 1995; Ganakumaran et al. 2003; Vethamani and Ganakumaran 2009).

Within TESL teacher education, limited research examines how student teachers themselves experience literary texts. Gopal and Lee (2023) note a significant gap in studies of reader-response pedagogy among Malaysian TESL educators, while Harfitt and Chu (2011) found that even trainee teachers exposed to reader-response approaches often struggled to move beyond efferent reading orientations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Context

This study employed a mixed-methods exploratory design to investigate literary responses among third-year TESL student teachers at a public university in East Malaysia. Participants (N=20) had completed at least two literature courses within their degree program, ensuring foundational familiarity with literary analysis. The sample was purposively selected from students enrolled in an advanced literature course focused on reader-response pedagogy.

While this purposive sampling strategy ensured participants possessed sufficient literary background to generate meaningful responses, it necessarily constrains the generalizability of findings. The sample's homogeneity—predominantly female, drawn from a single institution in East Malaysia—limits transferability to other Malaysian contexts, particularly West Malaysian universities with different demographics and institutional cultures. These sampling constraints are addressed in the limitations discussion.

Demographically, the sample consisted predominantly of female participants (85%) aged 22-23 years (75%). Native language backgrounds included Sabah Bumiputera speakers (50%), Malay speakers (30%), and Chinese language speakers (20%). All participants had achieved a minimum IELTS Band 6 or equivalent English proficiency, meeting university entry requirements for teacher education programs.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data collection utilised two primary instruments. First, the Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ), a 67-item instrument adapted from Miall and Kuiken (1995), measured participants' literary reading orientations across nine dimensions: Story-Driven Reading, Imagery Vividness, Insight, Empathy, Leisure Escape, Experiential Reading, Stylistic Analysis, Biographical Focus, and Rejection of Literary Values. Participants rated statements on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of aesthetic reading orientations.

Second, participants engaged in a foregrounding identification task using the short story Sambal Without Anchovies by Shih-Li Kow, a Malaysian author. This culturally resonant narrative centres on a Malaysian Chinese family running a food stall and explores themes of generational conflict, tradition, and loss. Participants were instructed to identify passages that struck them as particularly effective, moving, or memorable, and to comment on why each passage was significant. This open-ended task yielded written responses reflecting participants' actual reading behaviours. While the single-text design limits generalizability across genres, this methodological choice enabled in-depth analysis of response patterns to a culturally resonant work. The text's Malaysian authorship and thematic content (family dynamics, food culture, memory, loss) were deliberately selected to examine how cultural familiarity shapes aesthetic transaction in L2 reading—a theoretical question requiring focused textual analysis rather than broad sampling.

This methodology deliberately combined self-report data (LRQ) with evidence of actual reading behaviour (written responses), enabling triangulation and validation of participants' literary orientations. The use of a Malaysian text ensured cultural relevance, potentially facilitating deeper engagement than canonical Western literature might elicit.

Data Analysis

Research ethics were rigorously observed throughout all study phases, following principles outlined by Creswell (2013) and institutional review board requirements. Ethical considerations spanned four temporal stages: (1) before research commencement, (2) during data collection, (3) during data analysis, and (4) reporting and dissemination.

Before research commencement, formal approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee, the Faculty, the Programme Coordinator for TESL, and the course instructor. All participants received detailed information sheets explaining study purposes, procedures, time commitments, and potential risks/benefits. Participants signed informed consent forms documenting voluntary participation and were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty or impact on academic standing. Given the researcher's position as a university faculty member, power differentials were explicitly acknowledged, and participants were assured that non-participation would not affect course grades, that participation provided no academic advantages, and that responses would remain confidential from the course instructor until after final grades were submitted.

During data collection, participants' anonymity and confidentiality were protected through the assignment of unique codes (P001-P053), with consent forms stored separately from research data. Data collection was integrated into the regular class schedule where possible to minimise additional time burden. While literary response tasks were not expected to cause distress, the researcher remained alert to any signs of emotional difficulty, and participants could decline to answer specific questions without needing to justify their decisions.

During data analysis, privacy protection was maintained through the removal of participant identifiers during coding, with group discussions using group codes rather than individual identities. Any potentially identifying information was removed or generalised in transcriptions. All research materials were stored securely in locked filing cabinets (paper documents) and password-protected, encrypted computers (digital files), with access limited to the researcher and selected materials shared with the cooperating instructor and expert consultant under confidentiality agreements.

In reporting and dissemination, all identifying information was removed or disguised in the thesis document, conference presentations, journal articles, and other dissemination venues. Participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., "Maya," "Ahmad"), and the institutional name was anonymised. Raw data are retained for five years post-completion as per institutional policy, after which they will be securely destroyed. Participants were informed that they could request copies of their own data, access study findings upon completion, and contact the researcher with questions or concerns at any time.

Quantitative data from the LRQ were analysed using SPSS 27, yielding descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for each dimension. Written responses (N=38 comments from 20 participants) underwent qualitative content analysis following Beach's (1993) typology of literary response: Self-Involvement, Literary Judgment, Interpretation, and Associations. Two independent coders achieved 89% inter-rater reliability; discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Foregrounding analysis examined the selected sentences themselves, categorising the stylistic devices (lexical deviation, metaphor, personification, imagery, unusual syntax, simile, parallelism, repetition) present in the passages participants identified. This dual analysis—of response content and textual features—allowed examination of the relationships between specific foregrounding devices and the response types they generated.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Literary Reading Orientation: Profile of Student Teachers

The LRQ results revealed that student teachers exhibited strong tendencies toward aesthetic reading. Story-Driven Reading recorded the highest mean score (M=4.42, SD=0.43), indicating that participants were highly engaged with narrative progression and plot development. This finding suggests that Malaysian TESL student teachers approach literature with a genuine interest in storylines rather than viewing texts as mere linguistic exercises.

Three additional dimensions demonstrated strong endorsement: Imagery Vividness (M=4.08, SD=0.56), Insight (M=4.06, SD=0.61), and Empathy (M=3.71, SD=0.63). These scores collectively suggest that participants valued literature's capacity to generate mental imagery, provide personal insights, and foster emotional identification with characters. The consistency across these aesthetic dimensions indicates that Malaysian student teachers possess the receptive dispositions necessary for aesthetic reading.

Conversely, Rejection of Literary Values received the lowest mean score (M=1.78, SD=0.77), indicating that participants did not view literature as irrelevant to academic study or social concerns. This finding contradicts stereotypes of exam-focused Malaysian students who might approach literature instrumentally; instead, these student teachers demonstrated genuine appreciation for literature's intrinsic value.

However, tension emerged between participants' actual reading behaviours and their self-perceptions. While 75% reported reading literature for personal enjoyment, their weekly reading habits were modest: 40% read 1-2 hours weekly, while 30% read less than 1 hour. This discrepancy between positive attitudes and limited practice signals a gap between ideal reading selves and actual behaviours—a phenomenon common among busy university students but one that teacher educators should address.

Distribution and Characteristics of Response Types

Analysis of written responses to Sambal Without Anchovies revealed that Interpretation (30%) emerged as the most frequent response type, followed closely by Literary Judgment (28%) and Self-Involvement (19%). The remaining responses consisted of Associations (14%) and Descriptive remarks (9%).

The near-equal representation of Literary Judgment and Self-Involvement is particularly noteworthy, as these response types reflect different aspects of aesthetic reading. Literary judgment represents critical appreciation of craft, while Self-Involvement demonstrates emotional engagement. Their co-occurrence suggests that

aesthetic reading among these student teachers encompassed both evaluative distance and empathetic immersion—a sophisticated integration of cognitive and affective responses.

Literary Judgment: Attending to Craft and Style

Literary Judgment responses (28% of total) demonstrated participants' capacity to recognise and appreciate stylistic features. These comments addressed language use, narrative structure, and overall aesthetic quality, revealing metalinguistic awareness:

"Interesting word choice; it paints a strong image."

"This phrase gets to catch the reader's attention."

"This sentence shows strong symbolism and careful expression."

Notably, some Literary Judgment responses extended beyond mere recognition to articulate personal utility for participants' developing professional identities:

"I think this sentence can be used in my writing."

"Good analogy… can be used in my courses and improve my English."

These metacommentaries reveal that student teachers were not passive consumers but active apprentices, viewing literary texts as models for their own linguistic and pedagogical development. This finding aligns with Grossman's (1991) observation that effective literature teachers possess extensive personal reading histories that inform their instructional practices.

Analysis of which textual features triggered Literary Judgment responses revealed strong associations with foregrounded language. Metaphorical expressions, lexical innovations, and unusual syntactic structures were disproportionately represented among passages that elicited evaluative commentary. For instance, the metaphor "The stall was a shrine" elicited multiple Literary Judgment responses, with participants noting the symbolic compression and emotional resonance it achieved through figurative language.

Significantly, Literary Judgment was more frequently evoked by stylistically foregrounded but semantically opaque passages. When meaning was less immediately accessible—when readers had to work harder to construct Interpretation—they often commented on the craft involved in creating that complexity. This pattern supports Miall and Kuiken's (1994) finding that foregrounding prompts both affective and cognitive engagement, drawing attention to textual construction itself.

Self-Involvement: Emotional Projection and Personal Connection

Self-Involvement responses (19% of total) were characterised by first-person pronouns and emotional identification with characters or situations. These responses demonstrated readers' capacity to collapse aesthetic distance, projecting themselves into the narrative world:

"I felt his anger—I've been ignored by older relatives too when I offered new ideas."

"I cried a little envisioning how he holds onto what reminds him of his late wife."

"We used to have family dinners that meant a lot, just like the stall."

"I feel so pity for the father."

These comments reveal several dimensions of self-involved reading. First, they demonstrate empathetic identification—readers experiencing characters' emotions as their own ("I felt his anger," "I cried a little").

Second, they show autobiographical projection, in which readers explicitly connect textual situations to personal experiences ("I've been ignored by older relatives too"). Third, they illustrate emotional transportation (Green and Brock 2000), the phenomenon wherein readers become absorbed into narrative worlds, temporarily losing awareness of their physical surroundings.

Crucially, Self-Involvement responses were not randomly distributed across the text but clustered around specific thematic content—particularly passages dealing with family relationships, memory, loss, and tradition. The cultural resonance of these themes for Malaysian participants likely facilitated personal connection. When textual content activated participants' existing schemas for family dynamics and Malaysian domestic life, emotional engagement intensified.

One particularly striking pattern was the predominance of grief and loss as emotional touchpoints. The narrative's central character, Pak Samad, maintains his deceased wife's cooking traditions at the family food stall, transforming the stall into a memorial space. Multiple Self-Involvement responses addressed this theme:

"This practice of cutting the banana leaves was something Pak Samad had probably undertaken with his wife, and by continuing this practice, it was as if his wife was still there with him."

Multiple participants noted how this passage resonated with their own experiences of preserving family traditions following loss or separation. Such responses demonstrate how literature functions as a space for working through personal emotions, validating feelings, and connecting individual experience to broader human patterns.

The pedagogical significance of Self-Involvement responses lies in their validation of personal connection as a legitimate and valuable mode of literary engagement. Student teachers who themselves experience emotional resonance with texts are better positioned to create classroom environments where students feel safe sharing personal responses.

The Interplay Between Literary Judgment and Self-Involvement

While Literary Judgment and Self-Involvement might appear as opposing response modes—one distanced and evaluative, the other immersed and emotional—participants' responses frequently demonstrated their complementarity. Several passages elicited both response types, either from the same reader at different times or from different readers simultaneously.

This pattern suggests that foregrounded language—in this case, a striking metaphor—can simultaneously trigger aesthetic appreciation of craft and emotional resonance. The metaphor's stylistic innovation draws attention to the text's construction (Literary Judgment), while its semantic content—the sacredness attributed to a humble food stall—evokes emotional identification (Self-Involvement).

However, this complementarity challenges Beach's (1993) typology, which presents response categories as discrete and mutually exclusive. Our data suggest that Beach's taxonomy, while pedagogically useful, may oversimplify the complexity of aesthetic transaction. Rather than discrete response types, we might conceptualise Literary Judgment and Self-Involvement as poles on a continuum, with individual responses combining evaluative and emotional dimensions in varying proportions. This reconceptualisation aligns with Rosenblatt's (1978) emphasis on reading as a fluid, dynamic process rather than a fixed, categorical activity. Future research might productively examine whether other response pairings demonstrate similar integration—for example, whether Interpretation and Self-Involvement co-occur, or whether certain textual features consistently trigger hybrid responses.

This finding has important implications for the conceptualisation of aesthetic reading. Rather than viewing evaluation and emotion as mutually exclusive, we might understand aesthetic transaction as encompassing both dimensions in a dynamic relationship. Effective literary engagement involves oscillation between critical distance and empathetic immersion, with foregrounded language serving as a pivot point facilitating movement between these stances.

Cultural Resonance and Familiarity as Triggers for Aesthetic Response

This finding compels reconsideration of the relationship between familiarity and aesthetic response, particularly in L2 and postcolonial reading contexts. We propose that foregrounding theory's emphasis on defamiliarisation may reflect Western literary traditions where novelty and originality are privileged aesthetic values (Mukařovský 1964). In contrast, for L2 readers encountering literature in a language not their mother tongue, and for postcolonial readers encountering representations of their own cultural worlds in a historically colonial language, re-familiarisation—the recognition of one's own lived experience reflected in literary language—may constitute its own form of aesthetic intensity. When Malaysian student teachers encountered passages depicting nasi lemak preparation or family food stall dynamics in English prose, the experience was not one of defamiliarisation but of affirmation: 'This is my world, rendered visible and dignified in literary form.'

This theoretical tension between familiarity and defamiliarisation as triggers for aesthetic engagement warrants further scrutiny. Rather than viewing them as mutually exclusive mechanisms, we might conceptualise them as dialectically related: foregrounding operates at the linguistic/stylistic level (metaphor, unusual syntax, phonological deviation), while cultural resonance operates at the semantic/thematic level (content recognition, schema activation, identity affirmation). Aesthetic transaction may thus involve simultaneous operations— stylistic defamiliarisation attracting attention to craft while thematic familiarisation facilitating emotional engagement. This dual-process model would explain why participants generated both Literary Judgment responses (attending to foregrounded language) and Self-Involvement responses (connecting to familiar content) when reading the same passages.

Moreover, this finding raises questions about the universality of aesthetic principles derived predominantly from Western literary theory. Rosenblatt's transactional theory, while conceptually flexible, emerged from North American educational contexts and literary traditions that may privilege certain aesthetic values over others. The intense aesthetic engagement Malaysian student teachers demonstrated with culturally familiar content suggests that aesthetic reading in postcolonial L2 contexts may operate according to different dynamics than those documented in studies of Western readers engaging with Western canonical texts. Rather than seeking exotic alterity, these readers found aesthetic power in literature that validated their cultural identities and rendered their everyday experiences worthy of literary attention.

This theoretical complication has practical implications for text selection in L2 literature pedagogy. The conventional emphasis on canonical Western literature—justified by its historical significance and cultural prestige—may inadvertently position L2 readers as perpetual outsiders, accessing literature as linguistic exercise rather than aesthetic experience. Incorporating culturally resonant texts, such as Malaysian English literature, provides opportunities for aesthetic engagement unavailable when all texts demand cultural translation alongside linguistic processing. Schema theory (Anderson and Pearson 1984) supports this claim: when textual content activates readers' existing cultural schemas, processing becomes more fluent, affective response intensifies, and personal connection deepens. For L2 readers particularly, cultural familiarity may compensate for linguistic challenges, sustaining engagement even when vocabulary or syntax presents difficulties.

Yet we must avoid romanticising cultural matching or suggesting that readers can only engage aesthetically with texts reflecting their own backgrounds. Cross-cultural literary encounters hold immense pedagogical value, expanding students' imaginative horizons and cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities. The point, rather, is that pedagogical repertoires should include both culturally familiar and culturally distant texts, recognising that each offers distinct opportunities for aesthetic development. The challenge for TESL educators is to scaffold aesthetic reading across this spectrum—helping students find entry points into unfamiliar cultural worlds while also validating aesthetic experiences grounded in cultural recognition.

A striking and theoretically provocative finding emerged regarding the relationship between cultural familiarity and aesthetic response, one that directly challenges a foundational assumption of foregrounding theory. Traditional foregrounding theory, as articulated by Miall and Kuiken (1994), emphasises defamiliarization the making strange of language to disrupt automatised perception and stimulate aesthetic

engagement. According to this framework, stylistic deviation from linguistic norms intensifies attention and affect precisely because it violates readers' expectations. Yet participants in this study demonstrated intense aesthetic engagement with culturally familiar content everyday Malaysian domestic scenes, food preparation rituals, intergenerational family dynamics despite (or, we argue, because of) their recognisability.

Sentences depicting culturally resonant domestic scenes—preparing nasi lemak, family members working together at a food stall, intergenerational conversations about tradition—were frequently selected and commented upon. Participants noted that these elements felt authentic, recognisable, and personally meaningful. Rather than defamiliarisation, it was re-familiarisation—the recognition of one's own cultural world reflected in literary language—that sparked aesthetic response.

This phenomenon aligns with schema theory's emphasis on the role of background knowledge in comprehension and engagement (Anderson and Pearson 1984). When textual content activates readers' existing cultural schemas, processing becomes more fluent, affective response intensifies, and personal connection deepens. For L2 readers particularly, cultural familiarity may compensate for linguistic challenges, sustaining engagement even when vocabulary or syntax presents difficulties.

For Malaysian literature education, this finding validates the importance of including culturally resonant texts. While canonical Western literature offers valuable cross-cultural exposure, Malaysian literature provides opportunities for deeper aesthetic engagement by activating students' lived experiences and cultural knowledge.

Validation of Self-Report Through Behavioural Evidence

The consistency between LRQ self-report data and written response analysis provides important methodological validation. Student teachers who characterised themselves as empathetic and imaginative readers (high LRQ scores on Empathy and Imagery Vividness) indeed generated responses demonstrating those orientations—Self-Involvement responses rich in emotional projection and vivid mental imagery. Similarly, those endorsing stylistic awareness (high Stylistic Analysis scores) produced Literary Judgment responses attending to craft and technique.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings yield several implications for TESL teacher education and L2 literature pedagogy:

Validating multiple response modes. The prevalence of both Literary Judgment and Self-Involvement suggests that effective literature instruction should validate both evaluative and emotional responses as legitimate forms of engagement. Rather than privileging analytical distance, teachers might create classroom spaces where students feel comfortable sharing personal connections alongside critical observations.

Leveraging foregrounded language. The association between foregrounded textual features and heightened response suggests pedagogical value in drawing explicit attention to stylistic devices. Rather than treating craft as technical knowledge divorced from meaning, teachers might guide students to notice how specific linguistic choices shape emotional and interpretive responses.

Selecting culturally resonant texts. The heightened self-involvement with culturally familiar content underscores the importance of text selection. For Malaysian TESL students, Malaysian English literature by authors such as Shih-Li Kow, Tash Aw, and Preeta Samarasan—offers opportunities for deep engagement unavailable in exclusively Western canonical texts.

Developing aesthetic reading habits. The discrepancy between positive attitudes and limited reading practice signals the need for sustained reading engagement within teacher education programs. Creating structured opportunities for extensive reading, literature circles, and book discussions may help bridge the gap between aspirational and actual reading behaviours.

Preparing reflective practitioners. The metacognitive comments revealing students' awareness of literary techniques as resources for their own writing and teaching suggest an important pedagogical orientation: helping student teachers view literary study not just as content knowledge but as an apprenticeship into literate practices they will model for their students.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the aesthetic transaction between Malaysian TESL student teachers and English literary texts, focusing on two manifestations of aesthetic reading: Self-Involvement (19%) and Literary Judgment (28%). Through mixed-methods analysis combining self-report questionnaires with qualitative examination of written responses, the research documented that student teachers demonstrated sophisticated aesthetic engagement characterised by both critical appreciation of craft and emotional resonance with culturally familiar content.

The findings validate Rosenblatt's transactional theory by demonstrating how meaning emerges through the dynamic interplay of reader and text. Student teachers did not simply extract predetermined meanings from Sambal Without Anchovies but actively constructed personalised responses shaped by their cultural backgrounds, emotional dispositions, and developing professional identities. The co-occurrence of Literary Judgment and Self-Involvement responses challenges simplistic dichotomies between analytical and emotional reading, suggesting instead that effective aesthetic engagement encompasses both dimensions.

Significantly, the study extends existing scholarship by examining aesthetic reading specifically among Malaysian student teachers—a population underrepresented in literature education research. The cultural resonance finding—that familiarity rather than defamiliarisation triggered intense engagement—suggests that L2 literature pedagogy might productively emphasise texts reflecting students' lived experiences rather than exclusively prioritising canonical Western literature.

Second, the reliance on a single literary text—Sambal Without Anchovies—while strategically chosen for cultural resonance, restricts the robustness of claims regarding aesthetic transaction across genres and cultural contexts. Reader responses may vary significantly between short fiction, poetry, drama, and novel excerpts, and between culturally familiar Malaysian texts and canonical Western literature. The findings regarding familiarity as a trigger for aesthetic engagement, while theoretically significant, require validation across diverse textual types. Comparative studies examining the same participants' responses to multiple texts—varying in genre, cultural origin, and stylistic characteristics—would strengthen understanding of how textual features interact with reader backgrounds to shape aesthetic transaction.

Third, the study's cross-sectional design captures student teachers' literary orientations at a single time point within their degree program. Longitudinal designs tracking response development from first-year through graduation and into early teaching careers would illuminate how aesthetic reading capacities evolve and how teacher education interventions shape literary orientations. Additionally, the written response format, while yielding rich data, may not fully capture the dynamic, moment-by-moment aesthetic experience Rosenblatt describes. Complementary methods such as think-aloud protocols, eye-tracking during reading, or stimulated recall interviews could provide deeper insight into aesthetic transaction as it unfolds.

Despite these limitations, the study makes valuable contributions by documenting aesthetic reading orientations among an underrepresented population and by demonstrating the theoretical significance of cultural familiarity—a phenomenon that challenges conventional foregrounding theory's emphasis on defamiliarisation. These findings, while bounded by sample and text specificity, nonetheless illuminate important dynamics in L2 literary pedagogy that warrant further investigation. Future research might examine response patterns across multiple texts representing diverse genres (poetry, drama, novel excerpts) and cultural origins (Malaysian, Western canonical, postcolonial), employ longitudinal designs tracking development across teacher education programs, and incorporate multimodal data collection methods to capture the full complexity of aesthetic transaction.

This study acknowledges several important limitations that constrain the transferability and generalizability of findings. First, the sample is relatively small (N=20) and homogeneous, drawn from a single institution in East Malaysia. This geographical and institutional specificity limits claims about Malaysian TESL student teachers more broadly, as regional variations, institutional cultures, and program structures significantly shape literary reading practices. The predominance of female participants (85%) and the specific linguistic backgrounds represented (50% Sabah Bumiputera speakers, 30% Malay speakers, 20% Chinese language speakers) further circumscribe the scope of findings. Future research should employ multi-site sampling across public and private universities in diverse Malaysian regions to enhance transferability.

Beyond these empirical contributions, the study raises fundamental questions about the epistemological assumptions undergirding reader-response research. By documenting how cultural familiarity—rather than defamiliarisation—triggered aesthetic engagement, we challenge the universalist pretensions of foregrounding theory and suggest that aesthetic reading principles may be culturally and linguistically situated. This finding invites ongoing theoretical work interrogating how postcolonial, multilingual, and L2 reading contexts complicate Western-derived literary theories. Future scholarship might productively examine whether aesthetic reading operates according to different principles across cultural and linguistic contexts, or whether existing theories require expansion to accommodate diverse reading formations.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Malaysian TESL student teachers possess the capacity for aesthetic literary engagement characterised by both critical appreciation and emotional resonance. Cultivating these capacities within teacher education programs is essential if future educators are to move beyond transmission-model literature instruction toward pedagogy that honours personal response, cultural relevance, and the lived-through experience of reading.

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