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Personal theories of EFL learners: a case study on the development of personal theories

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Abstract

Individualized meanings and creation of responses facilitate both the comprehension and the reflection upon the text when reading literature. The present study is concerned with one EFL student and how his personal theories about reading fiction changed over a period of 10 months. The findings which are represented by repertory grid data are drawn from a larger scale study concerned with 20 EFL students. The data suggested that the participating EFL student’s personal theories displayed little change in content while the structure of his theories changed significantly and the change was non-linear.

Keywords: Personal theories; English language learners; personal construct theory.

1. Introduction

Literary texts trigger personal involvement and development. When we read literature, we reflect both on the text and ourselves in relation to our experiences. As Cole and Lindemann (1990, p.2) state when we read, we aim to experience reality and to stimulate our feelings and attitudes accordingly. McRae (in Carter and McRae, 1996, p. 141) supports this view by stating that “representational [literary] material opens up, calls upon, stimulates and uses areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion, from pleasure to pain. Sinclair (in Carter and McRae, 1996, p. 141) emphasizes the same issue and argues that “the use of these representational [literary] materials in the classroom can promote the development of the individual as a whole person, providing access to new and different experiences, feelings, desires and creative impulses.” Meeting literary texts in the right way gives the reader an emotional and personal experience and gives room for reflection. Since literary texts gain meaning through the reader’s viewpoint, personal experience, imagination, and interpretations, the reader’s contribution to the meanings in the text cannot be ignored. Social, psychological, and personal factors all account for what the reader makes out of a text and these factors form the reader’s personal theories about literary experience. Therefore, it becomes crucial to uncover
learners’ personal theories as to help them become aware of their own theories, values, strategies, expectations and how these influence their appreciation of the text.

2. The Research Questions

The present study aims to investigate the following research questions.

1- Does Gökhan’s personal theories regarding short story analysis change? If so, what is the nature and content of the change in her theories regarding short story analysis?

2- What is the nature of Gökhan’s construction of current self and ideal self as the reader both at the beginning and at the end of the short story course?

Literature and Personal Construct Theory

With the shift from structure-oriented approaches to reader-oriented approaches in literature, the reader’s role has been redefined and the reader has no longer been considered a consumer but a producer of meanings. In view of Reader Response Theory which led to reconsideration of the role of the reader, reader is no longer a passive receiver of the message but a producer interpreting the text on the basis of his/her expectations, background, personality and so forth. It is at this point that it becomes crucial to consider Personal Construct theory which provides the ground for exploring how the reader as an individual goes through the process of reading literary texts. The importance of Personal Construct Theory in literature lies in its emphasis on personal constructs, reflection, self, and self concepts as well as personal theories that govern reading and analyzing literature. The theory in fact has formed the basis for many disciplines such as clinical psychology, education, and linguistics. However, its use in the field of literature seems to be recent and needs to be encouraged. Personal Construct Theory as Kelly (1955) puts it “is based on the philosophy of constructivism” which implies that knowledge is a constructed version of the world. Personal constructs as Kelly (1955) defines “are bipolar and hierarchically organized into a construct system” through which individuals construe the world. Individuals are influenced by constructs-cognitive structures created as a function of past experiences and they can alter their constructs at any time (Gutbezahl, 1994).

3. Personal Theories

In his theory, Kelly places high value on theories of individuals as to develop a better insight into their values and beliefs. Personal theories refer to “a person’s set of beliefs, values, understandings, and assumptions” (Tann in Görgün, 1999). In the realm of literature, personal theories refer to the reader’s values, beliefs, strategies and assumptions about any literary experience. However, “personal theories usually exist at an implicit level; therefore, it becomes difficult to unearth and examine them. Hence, they need assistance in uncovering their personal theories. In addition, uncovering students’ personal theories results in their confirming or reconstructing their theories as they will be scrutinized, challenged or compared to those of others. In addition, it should be noted since personal theories are “often common sense and tacit in nature and may not necessarily be totally coherent and compatible they are viewed as dynamic and subject to gradual change or reformulation. (Kelly, 1955; Calderhead, 1987; Zeichner et al., 1987 in Sendan and Roberts, 1998)

4. Participant

The participant for the present study was one EFL student enrolled at the Faculty of Education, Çukurova University. The participant was a volunteer. At the time of the data collection, he had completed the required course “Introduction to Literature”. The participant had just started the course “Short Story Analysis” when the first repertory grid was administered.
5. Procedure

In order to achieve the aims of the present study, a descriptive approach was adopted. At the beginning of the semester, the participant was introduced the grid and he was explained how to fill it in. The participant was asked to write his own constructs regarding short story analysis by using his own words. As to do this, he was asked to think of an effective and ineffective reader of short stories. The participant was free to display as many constructs as he wished. During the 10 weeks’ period, short stories chosen by the teacher and the students were analyzed in the classroom. At the end of the semester, the participant was given the second grid. He was told that he might add new constructs or delete/modify the constructs elicited before.

6. Data Analysis

The repertory grid data obtained from the participant at two different times were analyzed by utilizing the Rep Grid computer program. The obtained data were subjected to both focus and exchange analysis.

Changes Observed between Time 1 and Time 2

The comparison of Gökhan’s two grids yielded change in regard to content. Between Times 1 and 2, Gökhan has incorporated two additional constructs (using colorful pencils and avoiding the use of dictionary). The exchange analysis of Gökhan’s initial and second grid reveals significant structural changes as five of his constructs fell below the 80 per cent cut off point. The constructs which showed patterns of structural change are (reading different kinds of stories, discussing the text with friends, applying the story to real life, using extra materials, and writing in the diary). In addition to these significant changes, we also see some implicit structural changes (see Appendix). Nearly one third of Gökhan’s constructs in his initial grid has gone through the process of reconstruction.

Changes in Construction of Current Self and Ideal Self

Gökhan’s perception of current self and ideal self displayed significant change between Time 1 and 2. At the beginning of the semester (Time1), Gökhan associated himself with ideal self at 60% level. That is, Gökhan did not construe himself similar to ideal reader and seemed to be aware of the need to improve. At the end of the semester, he seemed to have undergone change as he associated himself with ideal self at a higher level (67.6). As for the changes in ideal self, we see that at Time 1, Gökhan associated effective reader and ideal self at 88.3 per cent level; however, at Time2 ideal self was linked to effective reader at a lower level (75%). It might be informative to note that his grids at Time 1 and Time 2 also yielded significant changes both in content and structure.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the study which are in line with studies by Zuber-Skerritt (1988), Diamond (1991), Sendan (1995), Sendan & Roberts (1998), Yumru (2000) suggest that personal theories display change both in content and structure. That is, personal theories are idiosyncratic, complex in nature and are open to change. In addition, the construction of current self and ideal self change over time. Therefore, it can be claimed that personal construct psychology and repertory grid method should be utilized as to uncover the complexities of learners’ thinking and learning.
Figure 1. Structural Changes in Gokhan’s Time 1 and Time 2 Grids

Time 1

References

Appendices