

**THE ROLE OF VARYING VIEWPOINTS OF  
READERS IN EXAMINING A NOVEL:  
A STUDY ON READER-RESPONSE APPROACH  
AND PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY<sup>1</sup>**

**Bir Roman İncelemesinde Okuyucuların Çeşitli Bakış açılarının  
Oynadığı Rol: Okur Merkezli Yaklaşım ve Kişisel Kurgu Teorisi  
Üzerine Bir Çalışma**

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**Abstract**

The primary goal of this study is to find out perspectives of a group of English language learners as autonomous readers upon a detailed examination of a novel throughout eight sessions named as "literature sessions" held on a weekly basis. The study is based on the implementation of a process incorporating the assumptions of Reader- Response Approach and Personal Construct Theory as the fundamental means in its essence. The novel examined during the sessions referred was *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen and the participants consisted of 10 prospective ELT and ELL Departments students attending sessions at Istanbul Aydın University English Preparatory School in 2012 -2013 Academic Year. A questionnaire administered that aimed to find out the attitudes of the participants to the act of reading a novel from many aspects was given at first. Following that, literature sessions were held and written responses of the learners about the topics discussed were collected and the points on which they agreed or disagreed were illustrated with the help of tables. The analysis of the results of the questionnaire given before the sessions, the response papers collected and the tables presented in the study were very serviceable in making an observation of the shift in their perspectives of themselves as independent readers. This being the case, this study with its results may be an initiative for other studies concerned with the same issue with more participants.

**Key Words:** *Novel, independent reading, reader-response approach, personal construct theory.*

**Özet**

Bu çalışmanın temel hedefi, "Edebiyat Oturumları" olarak adlandırılan ve sekiz hafta boyunca düzenli olarak gerçekleştirilen oturumlar aracılığıyla, İngilizce öğrenen bir grup öğrencinin özerk okuyucu nitelikleri yardımıyla bir romanın detaylı analizine ilişkin bakış açılarını keşfedebilmektir. Çalışma, Kişisel Kurgu Teorisi ve Okur Merkezli Eleştiri yaklaşımlarının varsayımlarını asli yöntemler olarak bünyesinde bulunduran bir işlemin uygulanmasına dayanmaktadır. Atfedilen oturumlarda incelenen roman Jane Austen'ın *Pride and Prejudice* (Gurur ve Önyargı) adlı eseridir ve çalışmaya 2012- 2013 Eğitim-Öğretim yılında İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi Hazırlık Okulunda öğrenim gören ve ileride eğitim alacakları bölümler

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İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı ile İngilizce Öğretmenliği olan 10 öğrenci katılmıştır. Bir romanın incelenmesi konusuna ilişkin katılımcıların çeşitli yaklaşımlarını ortaya çıkarmak hedefiyle kendilerine öncelikle bir anket uygulanmıştır. Bunu takiben, edebiyat oturumları düzenlenerek öğrencilerin bu oturumlarda tartışılan konulara değin fikirlerini içeren yorum metinleri toplanmış, öğrencilerin hemfikir olduğu ve de olmadığı noktalar tablolar aracılığıyla görsele aktarılmıştır. Oturumlardan önce uygulanan anketin sonuçlarının analizi, her oturumdan sonra toplanan yorum metinleri ve çalışma içerisinde aktarılan tablolar, katılımcıların özerk okuyucular olarak kendilerinde gördükleri değişimleri gözlemlenmelerinde oldukça faydalı olmuştur. Bunların ışığında, bu çalışma, sonuçlarıyla birlikte, aynı konuya ilişkin daha fazla katılımcı ile gerçekleşen çalışmalar için öncü olabilme niteliğine sahiptir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Roman, bağımsız okuma, okur merkezli eleştiri, kişisel kurgu teorisi.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that the question of teaching literature with its direct relevance to exploring the role of readers has invariably been an object of attention for a large number of researchers in the literary realm. The studies carried out with a view to defining the role of readers in literary analysis have also emphasized the significance of the interaction between a reader and a literary text since they are believed to be inextricably intertwined with one another. Iser (Tompkins, 1980, p.55) stresses the crucial nature of the relationship between a text and its reader by touching on the dependency of making of meaning in a work on its reader to introduce the peculiarity of the realization of meaning during the process of reading. Based on this premise, it can be said that it falls more to the reader than to the instructor for determining the main conveyance of a novel analyzed in a literature course.

The novel as a genre is an ideal medium for gaining a better insight into the interaction between a reader and a text in that it is the genre that enables readers to identify themselves easily with what is being narrated. As Frye (2000) maintains” The novel tends to be extroverted and personal; its chief interest is in human character as it manifests itself in society.” (p. 9) In other words, the vivid presentation of human experience and worldly events in a novel with its projection of the lifestyle of the period in which it was written make it simpler for many readers to associate what they read with what they experience in real life. Apart from that, the privilege of the genre lies behind its sense of liberty inherent in its narrative mode as it is pointed out by Robert (2000)”The novel can do what it wants with literature; it can exploit to its own ends description, narrative, drama, commentary, monologue, and conversation; it can be either in turn or at once, fable, history, parable, romance, chronicle, story and epic.” (p. 58)

Relevantly, this emergence of the combination of teaching literature and the study of the interaction between a reader and a text as a crucial component of the present study calls into question the role of differing opinions of readers in a thorough analysis of a novel. Each distinct reader has the great potential of bringing a new dimension to the ways in which a novel can be examined thereby rendering it almost impossible to say that there is a fixed way of teaching the particulars of a novel in a literature course. As stated by Rosenblatt (1995) “Teaching becomes a matter of improving the individual’s capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self critically this process. The starting point for growth must be each individual’s effort to marshal his resources in relation to the printed page. The teacher’s task is to foster interactions- or more precisely, transactions between individual readers and individual literary texts.” (p. 25-26)

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The presence of an abundance of researches along with many methods considered to be effective in clarifying the issue of how to teach a novel and using the novel as a means to create independent learners make it fairly necessary to have a mental exercise upon the extent of the power of a learner rather than that of an instructor as the provider of knowledge in this process. That being the case, the first striking element of the issue in question can be said to be the central place the novel occupies as a genre with its relatedness to theories of Reader- Response and Personal Construct in the overall analysis of the present study. Taking into consideration the priority that the novel gives to tackling with human experience, the significant nature of the novel as a complementary part of literary studies seems to be certainly indisputable while the issue of defining what a novel is has remained remarkably contentious. However, in broader terms, it might be depicted as a piece of work in prose with its components of meaning like its plot, theme or the specific message inherent in it to be conveyed, whereas, figuratively, it might be likened to a building with many windows, each of which opens to another aspect of humanity to be known. As Crane (2007) puts it likewise “Defining the novel is easy: It is a fictional prose narrative of substantial length. While one may question the distinction between fact and fiction or the requirement the novel be written in prose, this simple definition seems generally apt, describing the books we commonly label as novels.” (p. 1)

A clarification upon the particulars of the novel as a genre in accordance with the purpose of the present study makes it essential to lay a great deal of emphasis on Reader Response Theory that could be regarded as one of the most influential one thanks to the change it brought with itself to the world of literary criticism starting from the early phases of 1940s and onward. Louise Rosenblatt, as the proponent of the theory, is doubtlessly the critic who is worthy of being mentioned as a highly distinguished figure since the change referred is actually a drastic change that led to the formation and adoption of new conceptions of teaching literature with her theory. Based on the premise that the meaning of a literary text resides in a reader’s mind, the theory obviously seeks undiscovered reasons why readers of the same text respond quite differently to it. As it is claimed by Rosenblatt (1995) “The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experience, links the signs on the page with certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, and scenes. The special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work communicates to him.” (p. 30)

In the content of the present analysis, another pre-eminent figure “Wolfgang Iser” occupies a remarkable place under the title of a critique of Reader Response Criticism with his special concentration on the study of the response of distinct readers to a literary work. The first and most important fact to be indicated about him is Iser meets on a common ground with Rosenblatt in terms of the way in which he believes how the meaning of a literary text should be studied on the part of any reader. Iser’s noteworthy element in his analyses of a reader’s role in literature is apparently the effort he puts into making it clear for all the readers from all walks of life that the particular ways through which they interpret a work are certainly what make them who they are as readers. As Lategan (1991) mentions “According to Iser, the text contains certain deliberate “gaps” or “open spaces”. These structured blanks spur the reader to action and entice him or her to supply the missing information in order to make sense of what is said. In this way the text requires an input from the reader and makes the reader responsible for the realization of the text as meaningful discourse.” (p.150) Underlining the influence of one’s

background or life experience just like Rosenblatt does, Iser aims to turn readers into more conscious individuals of the power they have as autonomous meaning-makers. He attaches a great deal of importance to having a better insight into the reading process and reader reception as Freund (1987) puts it likewise, "Iser's name is associated with the school Rezeptionsästhetik that has sprung up at the university of Konstanz in West Germany, whose focal interest, as the name indicates, is the aesthetics of literary reception. Within this framework, Iser's special concern is the reading process without which the aesthetics of reception cannot be described." (p.135)

Under the guidance of Reader Response Theory, the study of the novel as a genre with a view to defining the role of a productive reader who is assumed to produce the meaning in a work with his/her own means requires to elaborate on the illumination provided by "George Kelly" with the cores of his "Personal Construct Theory" to a serious extent. Personal Construct Theory, as the name carries with itself the word "construct", is related to the notion of constructivism that bases the origin of all the things in the world on people's ability of constructing in their minds how everything should operate together with their expectation of substantiating what they believe to be true as regards their worldviews. From Kelly's perspective, everyone in the world is like scientists who have their own constructs on every single thing or event they experienced or are likely to experience in the future. As Midgley clarifies (2000) "The other important aspect of Kelly's philosophy is his claim that an individual works to construct his or her reality primarily in terms of activities. Thus, what is of primary importance in the construction of a reality is the alternative paths for action that the individual has taken, or could take in the future. It is the things that are perceived as impacting on decision-making for actions that become part of a reality." (p. 26) Therefore, it is right to claim that what Kelly achieves through the theory which functions like an explanatory part of understanding how people can define themselves as independent decision-makers in their lives and as producers of meaning of a novel or any other work in the field of literature, too. As Fransella (1995) points out, "Kelly tried to encompass all aspects of human experiencing within his single theory of personal constructs. We are forms of motion. We are experiencing, living beings. We are our feelings, our thoughts, and our unconscious processes. He tried to build into his theory descriptions of everything we talk about as relating to being human-learning, motivation, emotions and perceptions." (p. 51)

The parallelism between Personal Construct Theory's main messages and those of Reader Response Theory along with its relevance to defining the leading role readers play in studying a novel becomes also much easier to understand when Kelly's corollaries are studied. His corollaries that are made up of eleven ones in total are highly important for the present analysis in that an examination of them definitely helps the hidden reasons behind individuals' different perspectives in literary interpretations to come to the fore. Among the corollaries, "Fundamental Postulate" stands out as the most essential one to be introduced in regard to its elaboration on the psychological processes of people. For Kelly, going deeper into these processes facilitates the task of grasping what constitutes the anticipation differences among people as Monte and Sollod (2003) stress in their analyses of Kelly and his corollaries, "A key word in Kelly's fundamental postulate is anticipate because it is the need for prediction that Kelly sees as fundamental." (p. 537) By processes, Kelly actually means a person's experiences, thoughts, feelings which all come together to enable people to have varying anticipations about the world. Furthermore, what is more to-the-point about Kelly's corollaries, especially about the postulate, is its applicability to the field of literature since what is proposed through it by Kelly renders it possible for a researcher to see why readers do not think in the same way while interpreting the message of a work.

When all the points emphasized are taken into account, it is appropriate to hold the view that the integration of Reader Response and Personal Construct Theories into the investigation of the reasons of the inconsistencies among readers' interpretations enhances individuals' understanding of the fact that each reader has to be differentiated from one another in terms of the varying methods they employ to reach to the bottom of a literary work. More importantly, it can also be maintained that the relationship between these two theories and the usage of the novel for the targeted success of the study demonstrate one important point: the process of studying a novel is not necessarily made up of attempting to ingrain the very conventional methods of teaching a novel to the minds of the students by turning them into dependent and nearly incapable individuals of putting themselves across to the others.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

The participants of this study consisted of 10 students of prep classes of ELL and ELT Department of Istanbul Aydın University in 2012-2013 academic year. All the participants took part in the study voluntarily and their ages ranged from 18 to 25 with the average of 20. The group consisted of 10 female students who participated in the literature sessions held regularly throughout eight weeks. In the process of data collection, they had 28 hours language courses in a week and they studied English in intermediate or upper-intermediate level. They also had at least 4 hours of reading lesson in their own prep class schedule. Their literary background and engagement with literature differed from one another; however, what they shared in common was that they were quite fond of literature as the individuals having spent much of their free time reading English novels independently.

#### **Instruments**

During the data collection period, all the instruments used in the study were:

- 1.** Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen was utilized as the novel about which all the participants had long discussions each week after having been assigned some specific sections of the work. The discussions about the literary medium referred provided the participants with the opportunity to share their own viewpoints with one another and to make an observation of themselves as independent decision-makers of the meaning inherent in the novel.
- 2.** A questionnaire written in Turkish, with the aim of preventing any comprehension difficulty from coming to the surface, was utilized. The centralized concern of the questionnaire was to find out learners' varying viewpoints upon the analysis of the novel as genre coupled with the methods they adopt for a better comprehension of it. The questionnaire administered had three sections.
- 3.** Following each literature session, response papers of the participants were collected and utilized to be able to have an overall analysis of their understanding of reading process and more importantly, of the examination of an English novel.

#### **Procedure**

The information about the chapters of Pride and Prejudice to be covered together with some important pages and lines to be read were given to the participants before each literature session so that they all could be well-prepared for the discussion. Starting from

the first session to the eighth one, the students seized the chance of exchanging their perspectives with each other regarding the key points ranging from defining who an independent reader is to major themes of the novel or a comparative study of the remarkable conceptions like the role of women projected in the novel with the one projected in the modern world. In addition to that, they were able to integrate other fields of studies such as psychology or philosophy into the subject matter of the discussion thereby making a visible progress in the process that led them to realize they key that they hold in their hands as the mere decision-maker of messages to be sent in the novel.

### **Data Analysis**

On the basis of the results of the questionnaire administered and of the literature sessions held, the data elicited from the participants helped to compare the answers and feedback of each one of them about the things asked in the questionnaire and discussed in the sessions. The comparison is primarily dependent upon learning strategies and studying methods of the participants concerning the subjects that are especially at the center of the sessions. To add, the data elicited can be said to have shed light over the uncertainty of determining the level of students' view of how to analyze a literary work with the methods they prefer to employ.

### **Results**

The analysis of the items in the questionnaire and of the elements in the literature sessions together with the illustration of them with the help of tables is a highly significant component of the present study. Considering the number of tables that are 18 in total, 1 table was formed depending on the study of the items in the questionnaire and 1 another table was formed depending on the study of the elements in the literature sessions and they were chosen as exemplary ones and shown below. The illustration of the tables below proves the extent to which they served the purpose of having an overall assessment of students' understanding of the ways in which a novel should be examined.

**Table 4.1** *Students' Attitudes towards Reading Novels in English*

	1		2		3		4	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Item 1	5	50	4	40	1	10	-	-
Item 2	2	20	7	70	1	10	-	-

1: Always    2: Usually    3: Sometimes    4: Never

Considering the purpose and function of the item 1, the table above can be said to demonstrate that students like reading novels in English and they have an obvious interest in studying this specific genre. The frequency of students who said that they always enjoy reading novels is 50 percent and of students who said that they usually like it is 40 percent. The presentation of the results with the percentage given is an adequate evidence to prove that reading novels appeals to the students' interest. As for item 2 that aimed to investigate whether students regard themselves as successful in reading novels,

it can be claimed that students really find themselves good at reading this genre since the frequency of the students who claimed that they usually believe themselves to be good at reading novels is 70 percent.

**Table 5.8** *Students' opinions about the progress they have made as autonomous learners*

<b>Literature Session Eighth</b>		
<b>The Overall Analysis of All the Major Points Discussed and A Self-Evaluation of the Progress Made as Independent Learners</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
Before I started taking a part in the sessions held, I used to believe that a thorough analysis of a work meant merely studying it with the help of the teacher perspectives.	8	80
Literature sessions helped me to be convinced about the fact that discussing ideas about a literary work with other participants has a direct influence upon increasing a learner's self-esteem both for himself and for the others thereby respecting each other's varying ideas.	8	80
Now, I have the idea that examination of a literary incorporates many parts and renders it possible for learners to do an independent study when necessary. It does not necessitate a teacher-based evaluation of what is true or what is wrong about the particulars of a book.	7	70

The results above presented with the help of the discussion and questions in the last session demonstrate the fact that the participants agree with the view that the sessions held played a significant role in shaping their characteristics as independent readers of a novel. Their satisfaction with their parts in the discussions is self-evident from their response to the questions and from their feedback since 80 percent of them believes that what they thought before starting to analyze *Pride and Prejudice* and what they think after the final session pose a contrast to one another. In other words, most of them had the presupposition that embarking on the task of examining a literary work by basing the interpretation about the essence of it on what they consider to be crucial may not be an ideal way to come to a consensus, however 8 students out of 10 changed their perspective as regards the ideal analysis of a work thanks to the literature sessions held.

**Conclusion**

The number of the students participating in the study was ten, thus the results cannot be generalized. The results of the present study may be an initiative for other studies concerned with the same issue with more participants. Considering the findings of the data analysis, it must also be emphasized that they helped to gain a much better insight into the varying perspectives of distinct learners as regards the issue of creating independent readers with the usage of the novel as a genre.

All the things reanalyzed, the participants who helped with their utmost to conduct the study, to have a mental exercise on the questions posed, to prove their ability as independent learners were the ones contributing to the administration and success of the present study to a serious extent.

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