

## RESPONSE PATTERNS IN NATIVE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE FICTION

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### INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades research into reading in a foreign language has indicated that reading strategies are transferable across languages (Clarke, 1980; Cziko, 1980; Sarig, 1987). Differences have been found, however, in the speed with which non-native readers are able to process text (MacNamara, 1970; Oller, 1972) and in the extent to which these readers are able to make use of syntactic and semantic cues (Clarke, 1979, 1980; Cziko, 1980; Carrell, 1983; Laufer and Sim, 1985). Such differences have been shown to cause comprehension difficulties for the foreign-language reader and research demonstrates that still further comprehension difficulties may arise as a result of lack of relevant cultural and rhetorical schemata (Johnson, 1981; Carrell, 1983, 1984; Steffensen and Joag-Dev, 1984; and Parry, 1987).

For the reader of foreign-language fiction, comprehension difficulties associated with inappropriate schemata when combined with syntactic and semantic deficits, might be theorised to have an impact upon response patterns, given that research with natielanguage readers indicates the existence of individual preferences related to form versus sentimental appeal (Williams, Winter and Woods, 1938), analysis versus intuition (O'Brien, 1981) or literary and social/thematic significance versus personal significance (Squire, 1964; Wilson, 1966; Purves, 1973).

It might be expected that, regardless of response preferences in the native language, comprehension difficulties in foreign-language reading would impede intellectual processing (related to analysis of form, style, and thematic generalisations). Thus the responses of many readers of foreign-language fiction would be confined to the affective domain, where plot, characters and setting are imbued with meaning on the basis of sentimental appeal or the ability of the reader to relate these elements directly to personal experience.

Research suggests, however, that even for native-language readers affective entry into the literary space of a piece of fiction is impeded if the reader encounters syntactic or semantic difficulties (Jacobsen, 1982). Beach (1972) and Applebee (1977) have found that for native language readers the medium of

response also affects type response type, in that written responses are generally shorter than oral responses and characterised by statements of interpretation rather than engagement or retelling of the story.

Surprisingly, given the many studies of response to native-language fiction, only one study has investigated response pattern transfer across languages, and Fanselow's (1971) finding that bilingual Spanish-English subjects exhibited the same preferences in both languages fails to shed light on the issue of transfer relevant to the majority of teachers of foreign language fiction whose students do not possess the same degree of competence in the foreign and the native language.

With the aim therefore of providing research data which teachers of foreign-language fiction might use to inform their teaching

practices, in this paper I report the results of a study investigating the extent to which readers of foreign-language fiction transfer response preferences from their native language. Written and oral responses to native and foreign-language fiction are compared, the impact of linguistic competence upon response patterns and approaches to fiction is examined and finally, the implications of these findings for teachers of foreign-language literature are discussed.

## METHOD

In this research a case study approach was used to explore the transfer of response patterns across languages. This was the most appropriate method for examining both oral and written responses to fiction, recording what readers actually did as well as what they said they did when reading, and facilitating review of and commentary upon the reading process by the reader as well as the researcher.

To compare and describe response patterns, however, it was necessary to reduce the wealth of data thus collected by categorising subjects' responses to fiction and subjecting them to quantitative analysis. This quantitative analysis formed the base for conclusions drawn about response patterns but these conclusions were also informed by reference to, and are in their reporting illustrated by, the evidence provided in the qualitative data.

## Subjects

Six case study subjects, two male (Peter and Anthony) and four female (Sandrine, Luisa, Jacinta and Clare) were chosen from

amongst a group of 29 students in their second or third year of studying Spanish as a foreign language at two Australian universities. The six subjects were selected on the basis that three (Sandrine, Anthony, and Jacinta) had obtained results in a Spanish-language cloze test which placed them amongst the bottom third of the 29 students who took the test and three (Peter, Luisa and Clare) had obtained results which placed them in the top third. Other factors taken into account in selection were an expressed willingness to participate in further research and apparent verbal loquacity, which was considered significant given the intent to require of case study subjects oral responses to short stories in English and Spanish.

### Instruments

Subsequent to completion of the cloze test the six subjects were asked to read, in the order given and with at least a one week interval between each reading, the following short stories:

The Nightshift by John Morrison (Australia)

Ana Mar<sup>o</sup>a by Jos<sup>e</sup> Donoso (Chile)

The Circular Ruins - a translation of Las Ruinas Circulares -  
by Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina)

En Una Noche As<sup>o</sup> by Miguel Delibes (Spain).

One subject - Peter - read The Tree of Knowledge by Henry James (England) rather than The Circular Ruins after it was found that he had previously read Las Ruinas Circulares. The criteria for selecting all short stories, and those which recommended use of the Circular Ruins above other stories written in English, were that they should be of likely interest to the subjects and also present them with some, but not insurmountable, vocabulary and schematic difficulties.

### Procedure

Written responses to The Nightshift and Ana Mar<sup>o</sup>a were collected by giving subjects the following written instructions: "Detail, either while you're reading or at the end of your reading, the feelings, ideas, opinions or reactions which you experience. You may write in the language (Spanish or English) you feel most comfortable with, and in any way you wish".

Oral responses to The Circular Ruins and En Una Noche As<sup>o</sup> were elicited using the following written instructions: "Stop reading whenever you are aware of particular ideas, feelings, images or reactions evoked by the story, and describe what is passing through your mind. Also stop and comment about your reading strategies, or any difficulties you experience in reading."

Oral data were collected using a strategy similar to that employed by Washburn (1978). That is, each case study subject was videotaped reading and commenting upon each short story and immediately after this watched the videotape with the researcher in order to comment upon the videotaped responses and clarify the meaning of non-verbal responses.

All subjects were provided with English, Spanish and English-Spanish dictionaries (as appropriate) and were invited to comment upon their reading in either English or Spanish, but in practice every subject chose to offer all commentary in English for the stated reason that this was the language in which s/he could express opinions and feelings most fully. In conjunction with the review of the second (Spanish) short story reading, subjects were also asked a set of questions relating to the elements of a piece of fiction they consider most important, reading strategies, and influences upon these.

### Analysis of responses

Both written and oral responses to the short stories were segmented into literary response units, defined as "the smallest number of words inseparably linked in terms of meaning or by reference to a single proposition", and each of these units was then categorised using a 16-point response classification system based on those developed by Squire (1964) and King (1979) (Appendix 1). Using the profile of response types thus obtained for each subject in respect of each set of responses, oral and written responses to the Spanish and the English-language short stories were subsequently compared by calculating Spearman rank correlation coefficients. These data, together with those provided in the videotape review process and through answers to the questions regarding reading strategies, form the basis for the following comments on transfer of response patterns and strategies across languages and the influence of linguistic competence and media of expression upon transfer.

### RESULTS

Analysis of subjects' written and oral responses to the Spanish and English-language short stories together with their descriptions in interview of the factors they emphasise when reading fiction, indicates that response preferences and approaches to fiction are generally transferred across languages but that the medium in which the response is expressed may influence the number and category of responses. Linguistic competence was found to determine the degree to which affective

(i.e., emotional) and intellectual processing (i.e., analysis of form, style, and thematic generalisations) of a piece of foreign-

language fiction takes place. These results will now be explained in greater detail.

#### Transfer of response patterns across languages

Data presented in Table 1 highlights the tendency of subjects to transfer response patterns across languages but suggests also that the medium through which a response is expressed may have an impact upon response patterns.

Table 1: Spearman rank correlation coefficients: written and oral responses by case study subjects to English and Spanish short stories (\* = significant correlation)

Written responses Oral responses English

Spanish English Spanish Subject: Peter

Written English  
responses

1.00000

Spanish .75665\* 1.00000

Oral English .89991\* .92662\* 1.00000  
responses

Spanish .74088\* .90055\* .82324\*

1.00000 Subject: Luisa

Written English 1.00000  
responses

Spanish .60220\*

1.00000 Oral English  
responses

.59737\* .23386 1.00000

Spanish .12151 .14859 .44804 1.00000

Subject: Clare

Written English 1.00000  
responses

Spanish -.12611 1.00000

Oral English .00271 .41325  
responses

1.00000 Spanish -.20679

.06392 .61271\* 1.00000

Subject: Sandrine

Written English 1.00000  
responses

Spanish .77997\* 1.00000

Oral English .41517 .57540\*  
responses

1.00000 Spanish .39710

.63070\* .96362\* 1.00000

Subject: Anthony

Written English 1.00000  
responses

Spanish .63516\* 1.00000

Oral English -.08656 -.05136  
responses

1.00000 Spanish -.14101

.01969 .64192\* 1.00000

Subject: Jacinta

Written English 1.00000  
responses

Spanish -.04572 1.00000



Speculative 4 9 2 6 5 2 4 333 2

17 Extrapolation 10 1 1 3

6 Intrinsic rapport 2 2 23171033112 3

20 11 4321 Comprehension 7 10155 23 331919331003146  
problems

212033 175 21 Comprehension 2 3 1 1  
problems: lack of

7 17 3 Reading strategy 9 20 1115

2066 1912 Literary space 2 13

7 17 9 Idiosyncrasies 7 7 7 3 6

5 Cloze test/ video 2

7 Number of 24334535404110930103  
responses

94 135155 29781614156 9 6 2133

Note: Figures in some columns do not total 100% due to the effects  
of rounding numbers up or down.

As indicated in Table 2, the medium of expression may influence the number and category of responses. For Clare and Jacinta perceptions of lesser facility in written expression resulted in a degree of brevity in written responses that militated against the identification of any clear patterns, and yet when their responses were expressed through the medium with which they felt more comfortable responses were both more numerous and correlated across languages. For Anthony and Sandrine there is also evidence of the effect of medium of expression: Anthony's written responses were categorised almost entirely as empathic and interpretational whereas his oral responses demonstrated a focus upon his reading strategies and comprehension difficulties; narrational responses and stated comprehension problems formed a large proportion of Sandrine's oral reactions to each text but, of these two categories, only stated comprehension problems figured in her written responses.

Of the six subjects, only for Sandrine did the language of the text being read appear to have any significant impact upon the



number of categories into which responses fell but, as her high response pattern correlations suggest, her response preferences were nevertheless generally transferred across languages.

#### The impact of linguistic competence upon response patterns

Although the number of response categories used by subjects is not greatly influenced by the language of the text being read, a significant difference is found in the extent to which subjects engage in the intellectual processing of texts, as indicated by literary comment or interpretational responses. As is seen in Table 2, although all subjects made several such written and oral responses to the English-language texts, only the two most linguistically proficient subjects - Peter and Luisa - made such written and oral comments in respect of the Spanish-language texts. Sandrine no such comments at all in respect of the Spanish-language texts, while for the other three subjects literary comment or interpretational responses formed only a very small percentage of either their written or their oral responses to a Spanish-language text.

This difference in the categories of response to English-language and Spanish-language texts is not explicable in terms of subjects' avowed focus when reading and nor is it explicable in terms of academic background. Although all subjects were studying Spanish at universities where interpretational responses and literary comment are encouraged, only Sandrine had studied English at tertiary level, and in interview all subjects emphasised their search when reading for personal meaning or connection with character or setting, irrespective of the language of the text.

Data presented in Table 2 thus suggest that, independent of general response preferences, a high degree of familiarity with the language of a text increases the likelihood of interpretational responses and literary comment, whereas lower levels of linguistic proficiency are associated with responses that emphasise linguistic difficulties or personal affective connection with aspects of the text.

#### The impact of linguistic competence upon the levels at which fiction is processed

On the basis of both the above data pertaining to differences in categories of response and interview data pertaining to subjects' approaches to fiction, it is concluded that the four less linguistically proficient subjects used affective processing as a

strategy to surmount comprehension difficulties when reading in Spanish. However, unlike the two more linguistically proficient subjects, these subjects were generally so preoccupied with gaining affective entry to the text and creating meaning on the basis of personal relevance that they were unable to stand back from the text and process it intellectually, for the purpose of drawing conclusions about its wider social and literary significance.

Only Peter, whose Spanish reading skills approximate those of a native reader, recorded an overwhelming preponderance of literary and interpretational responses to all texts. While these responses are undoubtedly a reflection of his general tendency in reading to develop expectations on the basis of his previous reading and to focus upon the interpretation of characters - "It should be them that carry the theme ... their motivations for doing things [should be] ones that you can identify with because they are coming from, human, real human knowledge" - they occurred in the context of marked differences in degree of sympathy or empathy for the characters the four texts. This suggests that for Peter intellectual processing occurs independent of positive affect.

A similar conclusion may be drawn in respect of Luisa's responses to the texts. In interview she described a search for "things I can relate to" and in practice her stress upon "sympathy or empathy" with the author was demonstrated through her many judgemental comments, but despite varying degrees of sympathy for characters and content in the four short stories she demonstrated through her responses to all texts that intellectual processing had taken place.

Like Luisa, Clare described an attempt when reading in each language to relate to the characters and also to "get the feel of the place", but the pattern of her responses suggests that only in Spanish does her ability to process a text affectively determine the extent of intellectual processing. Whereas, despite experiencing comprehension difficulties, Clare engaged in literary comment about *The Circular Ruins* from the commencement of her reading, her responses to *En Una Noche As<sup>o</sup>* were almost entirely descriptive of comprehension problems and reading strategies or were narrational until she was able to enter the literary space of the Spanish-language text. Only after entry had been gained did her comments become more varied and include attempts to interpret the characters' motivations.

Anthony also described a tendency in both English and Spanish reading to search for characters or a setting he could relate to but comprehension difficulties during his Spanish videotaped reading impeded his attempts to enter the literary space of the

text. Whereas during both the reading and the videotape review process in respect of the English text he offered comments related to literary form and interpretation, his comments subsequent to the reading of the Spanish text remained narrational. This, together with the inverse proportions of empathic and interpretational written responses to the Spanish and English texts (Table 2), suggests that for Anthony affective processing is a necessary precursor to intellectual processing and that in Spanish, unlike in English, comprehension difficulties may block intellectual processing.

A similar conclusion can be drawn about the role of affective processing in Jacinta's reading of Spanish-language fiction.

Although she described herself as generally seeking "something to relate to in the story, be it the situation, something about that character that I like or I can see in myself or in a friend or something", when reading *The Circular Ruins* Jacinta was able to engage in literary comment and interpretation despite her inability to enter the text's literary space. By contrast, despite feelings of great positive affect for the characters in *En Una Noche As<sup>o</sup>*, almost no intellectual processing of the Spanish-language text occurred. These differences suggest that when Jacinta is reading in Spanish her need to focus on affective processing as a way of overcoming comprehension difficulties militates against intellectual processing.

Sandrine's responses provide the clearest argument for the influence of linguistic competence upon the intellectual processing of texts for whereas she made literary and interpretational comments in respect of the English texts, these categories did not figure at all in her responses to the Spanish texts. Although her described focus is upon affective entry into any text - "Sometimes if I can relate to the character I become like the character [and] ... I always identify with the seasons" - during the English-language reading intellectual processing occurred despite lack of positive affect for the characters, while during the Spanish-language reading it did not occur at all despite a liking for the characters.

## DISCUSSION

In summary, data suggest that despite the general tendency of subjects to transfer response patterns and approaches to fiction from their native language, the capacity to engage in both intellectual and affective processing when reading in Spanish is determined by degree of linguistic competence. Whereas for all subjects intellectual processing of the English-language texts

occurred concurrent with affective processing and independent of empathy with the characters or setting, in Spanish all but the most linguistically proficient readers depended upon the establishment of a positive affective relationship with the text in order to surmount comprehension difficulties. Thus, for the four least linguistically proficient readers of Spanish, successful affective processing became a pre-condition for any intellectual processing that might take place.

This finding that in the majority of cases affective processing is either a pre-condition for intellectual processing or the only level on which processing occurs has significant implications for teachers. It suggests that teaching strategies encouraging affective involvement should be the foundation on which all classroom explorations of foreignlanguage fiction are based and it supports anecdotal evidence that interpretational responses to foreign-language fiction are most effectively encouraged by preliminary activities that provide students with the opportunity for emotional engagement with a text. It further suggests that text selection should be informed by reference both to the interests of students and the extent to which schematic difficulties are likely to impede or assist affective entry into the text.

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## APPENDIX 1: RESPONSE CLASSIFICATION SCHEMA

1. Literary Comment: i) positive ii) negative iii) observational

Comments (direct or implied) upon the aesthetic qualities, artistic merit, language, construction, or style of the story, or elements of the story.

2. Interpretational: a. plot b. character c. setting d. theme

Generalizations that represent attempts to discover the meaning of the story, motivating forces; reactions that demonstrate an attempt to impose personal meaning upon the text by analyzing

and/or synthesizing, into a personally satisfactory order, elements intrinsic to the text.

3. Narrational: a. accurate b. inaccurate

A factual retelling of the story, or parts of the story, with no attempt to interpret.

4. Judgemental: i) positive ii) negative  
a. re reading in general  
b. re story as a whole  
c. re specific element(s) of story  
d. re author

Reactions that demonstrate an attempt to impose personal meaning (upon the text) by referring to attitudes and ideas essentially extrinsic to the text, unexplained by an analysis of textual elements.

5. Empathic: i) positive ii) negative

Responses indicating that the reader has put him/herself in the place of the fictional characters, showing evidence of introspection.

6. Relational: i) positive ii) negative iii) observational  
a. personal  
b. societal  
c. literary

Responses in which the reader directly relates ideas, events, places, people, or the literary work to his/her own experience of a personal, societal or literary world.

7. Prescriptive: a. plot b. character c. setting d. theme

Responses in which the reader prescribes a course of action for a character, a desired plot development, scene construction, or thematic development, based on some absolute standard.

8. Speculative: a. confirmed b. unconfirmed c. non-directional

Responses in which the reader makes conjectures about the (prior or future) location or development of the story, alternative directions that the author may have pursued, the literary connections of the story.

9. Extrapolation:

Statements that have been inferred from information given in the text, but that are essentially an extension of that information.

10. Intrinsic Rapport: i) positive ii) negative

Stated liking, or lack of liking, for the story or element(s) of the story.

11. Stated Comprehension Problems: ii) negatively significant  
iii) observed

a. lexical b. grammatical c. textual d. spatial e. cultural

Comments regarding difficulty in comprehending or inability to comprehend a particular facet of the story.

12. Stated Lack of Comprehension Problems:

Comments regarding (unanticipated) ease in reading text.

13. Reading Strategy: a. general b. specific

Overt comments regarding the strategies used to elucidate text.

14. Literary Space: a. participant b. observer c. partially involved

Statements indicating the spatial relationship formed with the text.

15. Situational/Idiosyncratic Reading Practices, Proclivities or Reactions:

Comments referring to the impact of the testing situation upon reading practices or performance expectations, to feelings of physical comfort, loss of concentration etc., to the length or other physical features of the text, or to established preferences in respect of reading matter or story development.

16. Cloze Test/Video Reference:

Comments related to earlier completion of a cloze test taken from the short story, or to the videotaping of the reading act.