

## UNIT

# 5

# Examining Personal Responses

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### Theoretical and Rationale Foundations of the Strategy

Reading is a two-way process in which the text and the reader interact actively. The text looks to influence or persuade the reader, while the reader makes sense of the text by drawing on their own feelings, beliefs, and experiences (Pritchard, 1993). This idea is closely connected to, which is often used in literature teaching but can also help promote critical reading through writing. Eagleton (as cited in García & Castañeda-Peña, 2015, p. 188) describes reader-response theory as a progressive evolution of literary theory, where the focus of reading has moved from the author to the text itself, and finally to the reader, who plays an important role in building meaning. As reported by García & Castañeda-Peña (2015), the origins of the reader-response theory proposed by Louise Rosenblatt date back to the 1930s through what she called the transactional theory. Rosenblatt (1978) describes the approach in the lines ahead:

The meaning of the text resides in the person rather than the words on the page; the ‘transaction’ or interaction between the reader and the text is different for every reader, and the text is different for every reader since each is a unique individual... (as cited in McIntosh, 2010, p. 120).

The analysis provided by this author supports the idea that the experience of reading differs from one person to the other, even when the text is the same. Following the dialogue, Carson (as cited in Farahian, & Farshid, 2014, p. 373) expresses that “the text itself ... is incomplete; it needs a reader’s experience to make it understood”. The link between the reader and the text is so strong that it is the reader who gives meaning

and purpose to the reading based on life experiences and previous knowledge. This last characteristic may imply that there are no right or wrong interpretations, just as different interpretations as readers are. Additionally, the impact of the reader-response theory expands to the readers' personal lives. One of the advantages of the approach is stated by Probst (1988) who discusses that implementing it helps learners to construct themselves as human beings as they read.

Although originally developed to examine literary texts, particularly fiction, the reader-response theory can also be effectively applied to short non-fiction narratives, such as those found in newspapers (Goetz et al., 1994). Non-fiction reading can evoke emotional responses and promote personal connections, as readers may identify with the events portrayed or feel personally affected by the stories. These bonds support the relevance of the reading experience, as their influence lasts longer, engaging people to become avid readers. Kahu and Gerrard (2018) highlight the role of emotional engagement in reading, noting that it enables readers to critically relate the text to their own experiences and life aspirations.

The previous section introduced the main characteristics of the reader-response theory; this one aims to explore how this approach connects with writing. Weih (2005) explains that “philosophical responses are conveyed when the reader writes about his deepest convictions on the theme directly suggested by the book” (p. 67), showing how writing allows readers to represent personal thoughts and beliefs.

Further illustrating the integration of writing and reader-response theory, Pritchard (1993) suggests providing readers with a series of prompts to write at the different stages of the reading process, so that students connect what they are reading with their own lives. The author has proposed these stages to include writing before, during, and after reading, to clarify the meaning of a text and to support an informed comprehension and thoughtful reflection, especially when working with literary texts. She warns teachers to attentively design each prompt since they must evoke personal feelings and responses for students to develop close connections with the characters, occurrences, or topics in the text. Furthermore, the author recommends considering writing as an ongoing process, asking your students to write a journal for a long span so the interaction bonds strengthen and the transactional theory occurs.

In terms of critical reading, McLaughlin and De Voogd (2004) assert that engaging with a text critically requires readers to move beyond surface ideas, incorporating their experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds in the interpretative process. According to the writers, this approach allows for “exploring identities” (p. 90), as

readers draw upon personal and social knowledge to interrogate the ideas presented in the text and establish connections with their contexts. Students who engage in critical reading achieve deeper comprehension, being able to examine how texts reflect, reinforce, or challenge societal norms, values, and power structures. Critical reading constitutes a dialogic act in which meaning is co-constructed by the reader and the text, promoting autonomy and a grounded awareness of the relevance of standing from a position within broader social, political, and cultural systems.

Why do we use literary texts? According to Lazar (as cited in Farashian & Farshid, 2014, p. 373), using literary texts in the EFL classroom helps students to develop creative thoughts, critical thinking, and sensitivity. This vision is supported by Yang (2002) when stating that literature usually includes a series of everyday problems and situations that demand a reaction from the readers. Considering the characteristics mentioned, literary texts are profoundly suitable for this unit, whose purpose is to evoke emotional responses from learners through the use of fables as a highly relatable genre in children's literature.

This unit aims to encourage students to create a different meaning to the texts by connecting the experiences evidenced in the passages that resonate with students' backgrounds and perspectives. Applying this strategy is a critical component to improve students' critical reading abilities, as it guides them to feel the texts close to their realities, engaging with their personal lives, expectations, thoughts, and life experiences. In the words of García & Castañeda-Peña (2015), students' "reactions are intertwined with the readers' situated experiences as a reader and as a being in the life world" (p. 188).

## Unit Five: Examining personal responses

### Lesson 1: Reading the World as a Path to Self-Reflection

#### Explain and Demonstrate Stage

**Material:** Marker; blackboard; Worksheet #15; notebook.

**Time:** 80 minutes.

#### Suggested Procedure



**Step 1-** In collaboration with your students, begin by defining the term tyrant. Draw on the concept provided by Rundell (2008), who describes it as “someone in a position of power who behaves in a cruel or unfair way” (p. 764). Following this, guide a brainstorming activity to identify well-known historical figures commonly regarded as tyrants and record their names on the board for further discussion.

**Step 2-** Write the following moral on the board: “Any excuse will serve a tyrant”. It was taken from the fable “The Wolf and the Lamb” by Aesop (n.d.)

**Step 3-** Present to your students a personal experience in which a person repeatedly offered excuses to justify harmful behaviors toward you. Describe the situation in a reflective way, including details about your emotional response, the thoughts you had at the time, and the actions you ultimately decided to take in response to the situation.

**Step 4-** Distribute worksheet #15 to your students and have them read and re-read the whole fable: “The Wolf and the Lamb”. Upon completing the task, ask learners to select the emoji that best represents their emotional response to the text and briefly explain the reason behind their choice. Next, bearing in mind the definition of a tyrant, your students reflect on a similar experience they had and their actions to face the situation.

**Step 5 – (Optional)** Invite students to reflect on and write about situations in which they may have been tyrants themselves. Ask them to analyze the consequences of their actions, drawing comparisons with the events and the moral lessons presented in the fable. This exercise helps readers to foster critical self-awareness and ethical reasoning.

**Step 6 – (Optional)** Have your students share their insights of the worksheet. It would help them reflect on how a text could be perceived differently by each person depending on their own individual experiences.

Worksheet #15 was designed to explain and demonstrate to your students the wide range of responses that different readers may have to a text. These strategies align with the worksheet's purpose of encouraging students to share their insights, thoughts, and emotions after reading a fable. Additionally, attractive visual elements have been included seeking to motivate students to express their feelings comfortably, using emojis as a medium to represent their emotions.

**Worksheet #15: Reflecting on my Feelings (Photocopiable)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

- ✓ Read the fable: “The Wolf and the Lamb” by Aesop (n.d.)

## The Wolf and the Lamb

by Aesop

Once upon a time a Wolf was drinking from a spring on a hillside, when he saw but a Lamb just beginning to drink some water. ‘There’s my supper,’ thought he, ‘if only I can find some excuse to catch it.’ Then he called out to the Lamb, ‘How dare you muddle the water from which I am drinking?’


‘I couldn’t have,’ the Lamb replied timidly. ‘The water runs from you to me.’

‘Well, then,’ said the Wolf, ‘why did you call me bad names this time last year?’

‘That cannot be,’ said the Lamb; ‘I am only six months old.’

‘I don’t care,’ complained the Wolf; ‘if it was not you it was your father;’ and with that he rushed upon the poor little Lamb and ate her all up. But before she died she gasped out: ‘Any excuse will serve a tyrant.’

*Fable adapted from: Planet Book.com*



- ✓ How did you feel? Choose one of the emojis that best describes your feelings after reading the fable and explain the reasons.



Why?

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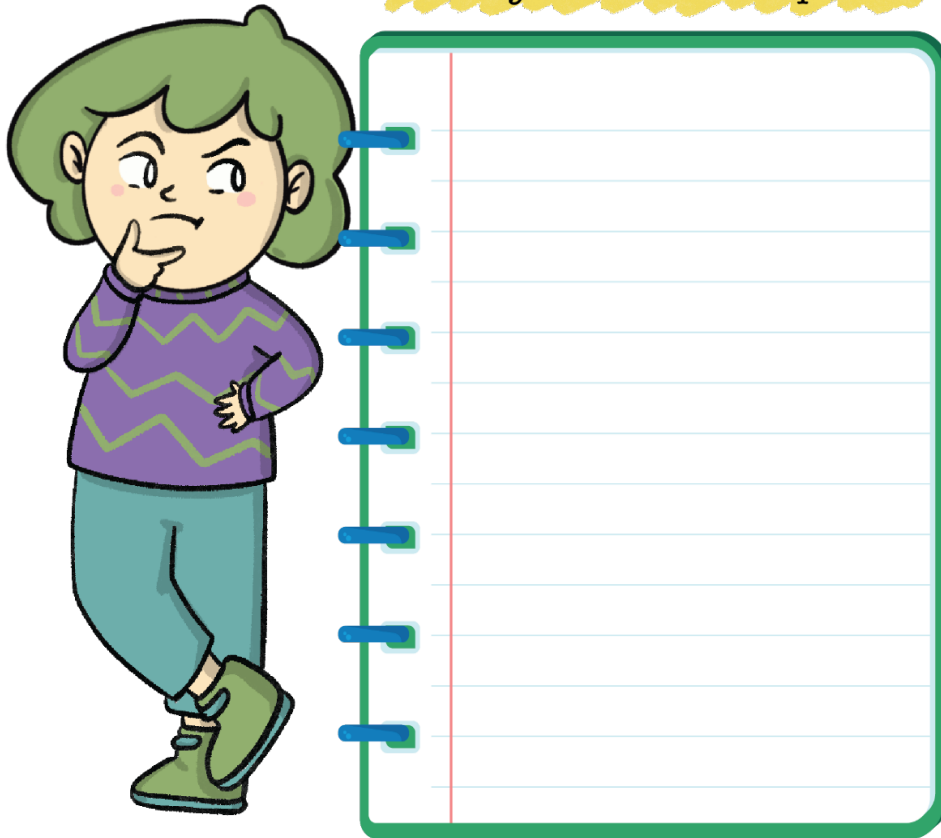
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- ✓ Based on the definition of a tyrant and the reading of the fable, think about a similar experience you have had. Write about it reflecting on how your experience connects with the fable.

Go beyond what is explicit!



- ✓ What actions did you take, or would you like to have taken when facing the situation described above?

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## Unit Five: Examining students' responses

# Lesson 2: My Thoughts and Feelings

### Guide Stage

**Material:** Worksheet #16

**Time:** 60 minutes

### Suggested Procedure



**Step 1-** Give students a copy of worksheet #16 and have them read the title of the fable: “The young thief and his mother” by Aesop (n.d.). They should write about the characteristics of a good mother/son.

**Step 2-** Have your students read the fable and write their first reactions to the text. Guide them during the process, reminding them to go beyond literal descriptions.

**Step 3-** Ask students to read the text again to reflect and write about connections between the text and their own experiences and context.

**Step 4-** Once finished, instruct your students to read the text for a third time. Then, guide your students in the process of writing a cohesive text to share their responses in front of a set of hypothetical situations.

**Step 5- (optional)** Have your students share their texts in order to reflect on the new meaning they have given to the text.

This worksheet has been divided into three main sections, developed under teachers' guidance as they pose some questions to help students in the reflective process. This worksheet was designed by outlining different writing prompts that could be used before, during and after reading (Pritchard, 2003). The purpose is to guide students to respond to the fable by connecting it with their own experiences and insights, so they propose a new meaning for the text.

**Worksheet #16: Where My Feelings and Thoughts Meet** (Photocopiable)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

✓ **Before reading**

Read the title of the fable: **“The young thief and his mother”** and answer the following question:

What do you think the characteristics of a good mother/son are?

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✓ **During reading**

Read the fable and interpret it.

## The Young Thief and His Mother

by Aesop (n.d.)

A young man, sentenced to execution for his crime of theft, requested to speak with his mother one last time. When she arrived, he asked to whisper something to her, and as she leaned in, he bit her ear nearly off. The witnesses, shocked by his violent act, demanded an explanation. He responded that he was punishing her, claiming that as a child, he had started stealing small items and brought them home. Instead of scolding him, his mother dismissed his actions, telling him they would go unnoticed. He blamed her encouragement for his downfall, believing it led him to the fate he now faced.

*Fable adapted from: Planet Book.com*



Write the feelings, impressions and thoughts that first came to your mind.

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Read the fable once again. Does the “young thief” or “his mother” remind you of someone you know? Who? Why?

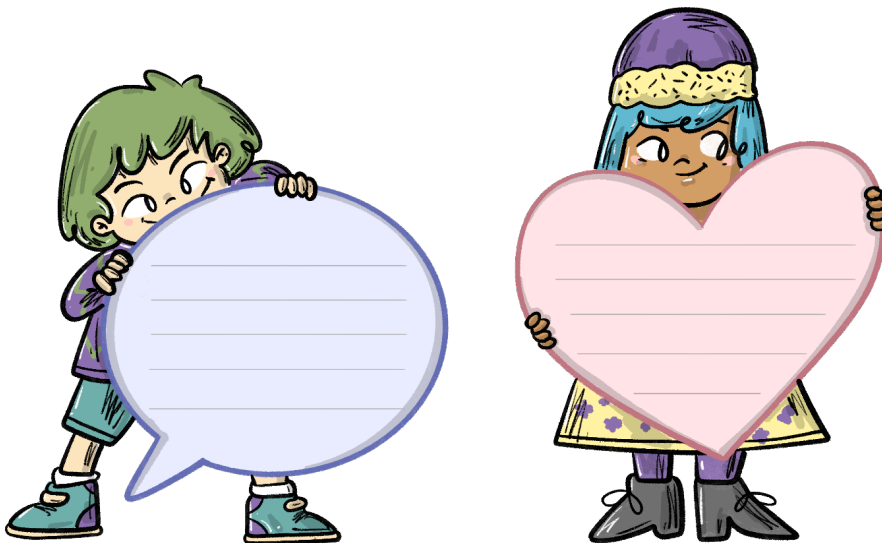
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✓ **After reading**

What feelings and thoughts do this fable evoke on you when thinking about your own experiences?



Share your insights into what actions you think could have occurred after the young thief was executed.

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Choose one of the characters of the fable, if you were him/ her, what attitudes and actions would you take in that situation?

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## Unit Five: Examining students' responses

### Lesson 3: Are There Viable Solutions?

#### Practice Stage

**Material:** Worksheet #17.

**Time:** 60 minutes.

#### Suggested procedure

**Step 1-** Provide your students a copy of worksheet #17 and have them read twice the fable: “The man and the Wood” by Aesop (n.d.).

**Step 2-** Give your students time to write about their thoughts and feelings when connecting the fable to previous experiences they had.

**Step 3-** Have your students reflect and write on how the issue presented in the fable prevails in our communities (university, neighborhood, city, country). Ask them to describe feasible solutions.

**Step 4- (optional)** Have your students share their insights in pairs and discuss how similar or different their comprehension of to the text are. Encourage them to explore the text analyzing different perspectives they have regarding issues and possible solutions to the problem.

Worksheet #17 is designed to engage students in activities to widen their interpretation of texts, shifting from an analysis of individual to social issues. Their raised awareness helps them propose concrete solutions to real world problems. This aligns with McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) conception of social action in critical literacy, wherein readers are not only invited to articulate their thoughts and emotions but are also encouraged to plan solutions and take action. As Freire and Macedo (1987) assert, “reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word continually implies reading the world,” underscoring the inseparability of literacy from sociocultural reality.



## Worksheet # 17: Linking my Life and the World Through Social Action

(Photocopiable)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Read the fable: “The man and the Wood” and complete the chart based on the connections between the text, your own experience and situations in your community

### The Man and the Wood

by Aesop (n.d.)

A Man came into a Wood one day with an axe in his hand and begged all the Trees to give him a small branch which he wanted for a particular purpose. The Trees were good-natured and gave him one of their branches. What did the Man do but fix it into the axe head and soon set to work cutting down tree after tree. Then the Trees saw how foolish they had been in giving their enemy the means of destroying themselves.

Fable taken from: Planet Book.com.

**My own life – Similar experience to the fable**



## My Community

How does the fable relate to a situation in my community (neighborhood/city/country)?



What realistic actions can I take?



## Unit Assessment

Considering the lessons in this unit were developed as an individual process, self-assessment has been selected to conclude the evaluation. This type of assessment allows students to analyze their performance in detail, specifically delving into the connections between the text, their previous knowledge, experience and further actions to be taken to contribute to solving a social issue.

## Reflection

Give your students sufficient time to express in their reflective journal all their comments and feelings, regarding the benefits and limitations of implementing the strategy for fostering critical thinking and the importance of building critically informed responses to information in texts.



**Unit 5 Examining Personal Responses Self-assessment Checklist** (Photocopiable)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

After finishing the proposed activities for fostering critical reading skills, I ...

- Connect the information in the text with previous knowledge.
- Create a new meaning to the text by using my own experiences, thoughts and ideas.
- Express my feelings as a way to respond to the information included in the texts.
- Look for suitable solutions to contribute to the community.

Some further actions for improving my weaknesses are:

- ✓ \_\_\_\_\_
- ✓ \_\_\_\_\_
- ✓ \_\_\_\_\_
- ✓ \_\_\_\_\_

