

EFL Student-Generated Symbolism towards “God Sees the Truth but Waits”

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Abstract: This study investigates EFL learners’ student-generated symbolism in responding to the short story “*God Sees the Truth but Waits*” by Leo Tolstoy. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the participants were 20 sixth-semester students enrolled in a Literary Appreciation course in an English Education study program. After guided classroom discussions on symbolism as a reader-response strategy, the students were asked to create their own symbolic representations of the text and provide written explanations of their interpretations. The data, consisting of students’ symbolism and written responses, were analyzed thematically. The findings showed that student-generated symbolism enabled learners to engage in personal, critical, and multimodal meaning-making, revealing higher-order interpretive thinking in response to the literary text. The study suggests that student-generated symbolism may function effectively as a multimodal reader response that can be meaningfully integrated into EFL literature classes.

Keywords: literary appreciation; reader response approach; student-generated symbolism

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji simbolisme yang dihasilkan oleh mahasiswa EFL dalam merespons cerita pendek “*God Sees the Truth but Waits*” karya Leo Tolstoy. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif dengan partisipan sebanyak 20 mahasiswa semester enam yang mengikuti mata kuliah Apresiasi Sastra pada program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris. Setelah dilakukan diskusi kelas mengenai simbolisme sebagai strategi respons pembaca, mahasiswa diminta untuk menciptakan representasi simbolik mereka sendiri terhadap teks sastra serta memberikan penjelasan tertulis atas interpretasi yang dihasilkan. Data penelitian berupa simbolisme dan respons tertulis dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa simbolisme yang dihasilkan mahasiswa memungkinkan mereka untuk terlibat dalam proses pemaknaan yang bersifat personal, kritis and multimodal serta merefleksikan kemampuan berpikir interpretative tingkat tinggi terhadap teks sastra. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa simbolisme yang dihasilkan oleh mahasiswa dapat berfungsi secara efektif sebagai bentuk respons pembaca multimodal yang dapat diintegrasikan secara bermakna dalam pembelajaran sastra di konteks EFL.

Kata kunci: apresiasi sastra; pendekatan respons pembaca; simbolisme mahasiswa

INTRODUCTION

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, it is crucial to engage the students with literature since it can play a crucial role in improving not only their English language skills but also their creativity and critical thinking (Lazar, 2015; Paran, 2008). Literary works could expose EFL learners

to authentic use of the language, interesting storytelling, and experiences that require them to engage with the meanings found in the literary works. Mays(2017)also argued that literary works engage readers' emotions, imaginations, senses, and intellects by directly representing experiences rather than merely discussing them.

Despite the importance of bringing literature to the classroom, it is quite a challenge to teach literature in an EFL context. It is likely because of the teacher's strong authority to direct the student to grasp the same meaning as what the author of the literary works intended. Therefore, EFL students are not encouraged enough to explore by themselves (Kinasih, 2020). There is an urge to shift the paradigm in literature teaching –from the transmission to transaction paradigm (Herlina, 2016). It suggests how the students play an active role as the readers. Therefore, it is necessary to use an appropriate approach to bring literature effectively.

Among the literary approaches used in the classroom, symbolism could promote EFL students' deeper interpretation of abstract concepts using concrete objects (Eagleton, 1996). In literature, art, and other forms of expression, symbolism is essential for improving reader comprehension and interpretation. It functions as a subtle yet effective technique that enhances stories by giving them greater levels of meaning that go beyond the obvious plot. However, it can be a challenge for EFL learners to grasp the meanings of symbols. Those meanings can be anchored in specific cultural, historical, or religious settings that can differ greatly from the learners' background (Kramsch, 1993; Liu, 2013). EFL learners can interpret symbols if they are guided as found by previous studies. Turkish EFL students were able to identify and reflect on symbols found in American short stories through contextual and thematic support (Kaya, 2014). Another previous study also found similar results that guided literary analysis helped Iranian university students improve their interpretative skills and cross-cultural understanding, particularly when figurative language and symbolism were used in the stories given (Sellami & Ghabanchi, 2017). Thus, EFL learners can understand symbolism as long as they are given effective guidance.

Symbolism is also closely associated with a reader-response strategy. Reader response theory has successfully shaped how literature can be brought into the classroom. Rather than focusing on one fixed meaning within the text, the theory could bring the students to become active readers in grasping the meaning, in which the readers' personal experiences, emotions, knowledge, and background could influence their interpretation and appreciation of the literary works (Rosenblatt, 1978). The reader response approach offers many advantages as highlighted by the previous study (Kunjanman & Aziz, 2021). The advantages are promoting students' ability to provide personal responses to literary works, reflective thinking and creativity and motivating students to learn literature. Another previous study (Garzón & Castañeda-Peña, 2015) also argued that employing a reader-response approach to the classroom makes the students aware of more meanings of the literary works and eager when listening to others' meanings. This approach could also promote independence and critical thinking as it encourages students to bring their own opinions to the text given, resulting in the improvement of their comprehension of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures in context (Hossain, 2024).

In terms of the EFL context, the reader response strategy could also encourage EFL students to respond to short stories by expressing personal feelings, connections, and interpretations, which would lead to critical reflection and finding personal meaning in literature (Febriani, 2019). It was also supported by another previous study (Ishak et al., 2017) which found that reader response strategy improves EFL teacher trainees' critical thinking and literary engagement. As a result, the students can engage the story more personally and creatively.

Traditionally, in conducting symbolism, the readers would analyze the object, character, or story events to convey deeper meanings through the lens of authorial purpose. Kinasih (2020) found that EFL students improved in their interpretation of literary symbols by using reflective writing in responding to short stories and poems. However, the readers could also be encouraged to generate their own symbols in responding to the literary works.

Reader response theory has also been extended beyond written responses to include visual and creative interpretation. Kesler (2010) argues that student-generated drawings can function as legitimate reader responses since they can reveal how students are readers interpret, personalize and negotiate meaning from the literary texts. Asking students to create their own symbols could not only help them to have a deeper comprehension of the literary works but also improve their critical thinking. Some previous studies have also investigated this matter, Smagorinsky and Coppock (1994) argued that the students’ symbols as their literary responses assisted them in internalizing and reinterpreting the themes. Similarly, another previous study (Pantaleo, 2002) also found that asking students to create symbolic illustrations would encourage their own thinking and emotional engagement with the literary works. Ghazali (2008) also found that Malaysian ESL learners showed a stronger connection to the literary works and were more confident when they were given a chance to use visual representations to respond the literary work. Therefore, encouraging student-generated symbols could be used as a reader response strategy as it can be a bridge between textual content and personal meaning, which would lead to deeper understanding and less anxiety in literature.

At the same time, communication and educational methods are becoming more multimodal, incorporating a combination of visual and linguistic to create meaning (Bezemer & Kress, 2016; Kress, 2010). From a multimodal perspective, meaning is constructed not only through language but also through the multiple semiotic modes such as image layout, and written text. In the EFL context, previous studies found that multimodal responses, including visual representations, could enhance learners’ engagement, confidence, and interpretive depth (Freyn, 2017; Ghazali, 2008). Multimodality allows abstract ideas to be represented through concrete visual forms, enabling learners to express understanding that may not be easily articulated through language only.

Another challenge in the teaching of literature in EFL contexts is the linguistic load that literary texts typically contain. Literary texts are rich not only in figurative language and symbolism, but also in complex structures and unfamiliar vocabulary that may be faced by EFL learners. These traits are pedagogically valuable because they expose EFL learners to authentic language use; however, they may also generate anxiety, avoidance or surface-level comprehension when students are expected to provide “correct” interpretations. Many studies have shown that EFL learners tend to perceive literature as demanding because they are expected to guess the teacher’s intended meaning rather than build their own interpretation (Liu, 2013; Paran, 2008). As a result, the students may become passive readers, relying on teacher’s explanation rather than engaging critically with the text given. With this concern mentioned above, symbolism can play an important role because the students are encouraged to create new symbols of their own as a tool to respond to the text given. They must interpret the narrative, select salient ideas, and then redesign the meaning in another visual form. This process promotes more student involvement in literature class. Hence, asking them to generate their own symbols as their way of meaning-making might help EFL learners. In the EFL context, the students might have rich interpretative ideas but lack the linguistic skills to fully articulate them in written form (Kesler, 2010).

Given this gap, the present study investigated how EFL learners generate symbolic representations in responding to the short story “God Sees the Truth but Wait” by Leo Tolstoy. This narrative work can

offer a unique opportunity to navigate complex moral dilemmas contained in the short story. By analyzing both the visual symbols produced by EFL students and their written interpretations, this study seeks to explore how learners construct meaning through visual symbolism. The study would contribute to existing research on reader response, symbolism, and multimodal meaning-making in EFL contexts.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aiming to explore how EFL learners construct meaning through student-generated symbolism in responding to a literary text. The participants of the study were 20 sixth-semester undergraduate students enrolled in a Literary Appreciation course in an English Education Study Program. The participants were selected using purposive sampling as they met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The criteria were: (1) students were EFL learners, (2) students were officially enrolled in the Literary Appreciation course at the time of the study, and (3) students had prior exposure to basic literary concepts, including figurative language and symbolism.

The data collection was conducted as part of regular classroom activities. The short story entitled “God Sees the Truth but Waits” by Leo Tolstoy was assigned as required reading. Before reading the short story, the students were given guidance about symbolism as a reader response strategy. So that they could generate their own symbols representing the story. After reading and discussing the story, the students were assigned to create their own symbols that could represent the meaning they had grasped. The students were given two options –they could draw the symbols by themselves, or they could take the pictures from the internet, and they were also required to write the interpretations of their symbols. Both visual and written responses should be examined in relation to one another to accurately capture students’ meaning-making processes. By treating images and texts as complementary modes, the study minimized subjectivity and strengthened interpretive credibility (Kesler, 2010).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several stages. First, all visual symbols and written explanations were compiled and reviewed repeatedly to achieve data familiarization. The review process involved two colleagues with expertise in EFL literature teaching. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying recurring symbolic elements, metaphorical representations, and thematic references in both visual and textual data. Third, the initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories based on similarities in symbolic meaning and represented ideas. The themes were injustice and imprisonment; inner freedom, patience, and forgiveness; hope and divine justice; emotional and philosophical metaphors; and moral reflection and human values. Furthermore, the interpretation of visual symbols was consistently linked to EFL students’ written explanations, which reduced the subjectivity in how meaning was assigned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After reading the short story “God Sees the Truth but Waits”, the students were assigned to create their own symbolic interpretation based on the meaning grasped from the short story given. They also need to write their interpretations of the symbols. It is in line with Kesler (2010), the interpretation of students’ symbols was anchored in their written explanations to minimize subjectivity. The student-

generated symbols, then, were grouped into five thematic categories based on the symbols and their interpretation. The thematic categories can be seen below

Table 1 Student-Generated Symbols

Student-Generated Symbols	Represented Themes	Interpretation
Cage, Tied Horse, Prison, Gray Hair, Crow in a Cage	Injustice and Imprisonment	Recognizes physical and emotional confinement due to false accusation
Key, Open Cage, Night and Stars, Waves, Open Bloody Hands, Book of Saints	Inner Freedom, Patience, and Forgiveness	Focuses on Aksionov’s spiritual journey and moral strength
Flower Blooming on Dry Branch, Deep-Rooted Tree, Needle Pin, Banyan Tree	Hope and Divine Justice	Highlights faith in divine timing and eventual justice
Butterfly with Burning Wings, Anglerfish, Compass, Hourglass	Visual Metaphor for Emotional/Philosophical Ideas	Demonstrates abstract thinking and symbolic creativity
Turning Back Time, Dove	Transformation and Moral Reflection	Expresses character development, ethical growth and empathy

Injustice and Imprisonment

A significant number of the students tried to illustrate the injustice of Aksionov’s 26-year imprisonment. Rather than drawing literal prison walls, they tried to produce metaphors that could describe physical and emotional confinement. Some students used symbols such as a cage, a tied horse, a prison cell, and gray hair to represent the physical and psychological change due to the wrongful imprisonment of the protagonist of the short story. One of the symbols used was a tied horse; the student described how it symbolizes a man who is chained in prison and should be free from a crime he did not commit. Another student also depicted the crow in a cage symbol. The choice of a crow, often a symbol of ill omen, suggests that the student might perceive the prison as a place of darkness. However, there is also a student who tried to symbolize Aksionov’s changes while in prison by using the picture of a prison, which she described as world injustice and spiritual purification. Those symbols reflect the students’ awareness of Aksionov’s unjust treatment.

Inner Freedom, Patience, and Forgiveness

This collected theme captures how the main character came through a spiritual journey. It was found that the students identified that while Aksionov’s body was trapped in a prison, his spirit achieved liberation through the act of forgiving the real suspect. Symbols like a key, an open cage, stars in the night sky, waves, and open, bloody hands were used to express Aksionov’s spiritual liberation through forgiveness. One of the symbols drawn by the student can be seen below.



Figure 1 Student-Generated Symbol (*Open Cage*)

The student's explanation of the symbol:

"A bird that should fly freely, but the bird must be locked in a cage in a situation that cannot be changed, like Aksionov's life, which was initially fine but changed because of an accusation that was not his fault. And why is the cage open? Like a bird that is patient when trapped, and like Aksionov, he is patient and chooses to forgive the person who made him wrong, and when he is about to be released, he feels that it is useless. Aksionov is free, his wife has died, his children do not know him, and when he is about to be released, he dies. So the meaning of this symbol illustrates that Aksionov's death, in essence a free person, even though not physically, but his heart is free because of patience." This symbol was utilized to symbolize Aksionov's faith and patience.

A symbol of a key is also utilized; a student tried to represent the spiritual opening that occurred once Aksionov stopped seeking human injustice and turned toward divine forgiveness. The key there is just like a solution of Aksionov's misfortunes. Another student tried to use a picture of rising and falling waves to represent Aksionov's life. The student explained as the waves crash towards the shorelines, sweeping up everything could represent the moment when the protagonist chooses to forgive and releases the emotional burden that weighs him down. As the protagonist says, "Seems that only God can know the truth, it is to Him alone we must appeal, and from Him alone expect mercy". Those symbols conveyed the idea that despite his continued physical imprisonment, Aksionov found inner peace through patience and a religious journey. Another symbol was also utilized by a student, it is an open bloody hand, the student interprets blood-covered hand as forgiveness, self-acceptance, and humility. He also added, "Although there must be scars, still being able to give forgiveness is proof of generosity".

Hope and Divine Justice

A number of students realizes the main moral of the story which is God "waits", some symbols are used to represent the passage of time and the certainty of moral truth. Some students used pictures of a deeply rooted tree, a blooming flower on a dry branch, and a needle or pin to symbolize the idea of delayed justice. In keeping with the story's moral value that "only God can know the truth," these symbols convey the idea that the truth may be repressed but will eventually be revealed. One of the symbols can be seen below.



Figure 2 Student-Generated Symbol (A Deeply Rooted Tree with Blooming Flower)

The student, then, explained that a deeply rooted tree symbolizes Aksionov’s unwavering faith and determination, as he remains resolute in his belief that the truth will eventually surface. Dry branches reflect on the hardship Aksionov faces, along with the feelings of hopelessness and confusion caused by the injustice he endures. Then the blooming flowers symbolize the eventual revelation of the truth and the hope and freedom that emerge in due time, aligning with the idea that God will reveal the truth when the moment is right.

Another student tried to use a small needle or pin to symbolize the truth, which may not be directly visible, but has the power to “tough” the core. She also mentioned how the truth in the story is indeed hidden for quite a long time but it finally appears –like the sharpness of a needle that is finally felt even though it seems small. Though small and often hidden, its presence is eventually felt, mirroring the slow but painful revelation of Makar’s guilt, in which the story is told that Makar eventually felt guilty of what he had done to the main character.

A Banyan Tree is also utilized by one of the students, she insisted that the banyan tree symbolizes patience due to its strong and durable roots. By using the symbol, the student suggests that Aksionov’s faith is the only thing that remains upright when his life is low.

Emotional and Philosophical Metaphors

Students used metaphorical imagery to depict Aksionov’s emotional journey, his quest for meaning, and the futility of human attempts to control fate. The symbols are an hourglass, a compass, an anglerfish, and a butterfly with burning wings. The picture below shows beautiful flowers and a burning butterfly. The student elaborated that the flowers depict the life that Aksionov had –he had a wife, children and also a shop. Then, a butterfly with burning wings symbolizes how charming and ambitious Aksionov was, and burning wings here means what makes him unable to do anything and slowly disappear and become dust. Both symbol and interpretation show the student’s emotional connections to the text, which should be built in effective reading.



Figure 3 Student-Generated Symbol (A Butterfly with Burning Wings)

Besides that, an anglerfish was also used by one of the students. The student elaborated that

“I think that his life is almost like an anglerfish. It lives in the deep ocean by the only light that it can see just Bioluminesen, or we call it, the lamp on its head. But when it tried to see the light on the surface with all of its efforts, and when the time came, it died. So. it also happened to Aksionov. He lived in jail for 26 years, and as long as that time, he tried to prove that he was not wrong and it just been misunderstood. In the end, he could do it and prove it. But, when the time he would go out of jail, he died.”

This “Anglerfish” metaphor demonstrates that the student is not just reading the story; she is “re-authoring” it through a personal lens. This student's use of a high level of metaphor demonstrates how a multimodal reader response can help students move beyond their initial understanding and express complex insights that might be difficult to convey using language alone. These symbols suggest a deeper comprehension of the undertones of the story. One student, for instance, highlighted the search for truth and the price of enlightenment by comparing Aksionov's gradual decline to an anglerfish that dies after seeing the light. These responses demonstrate how symbolism can act as a link between the content of literary works and introspection, and it is consistent with higher-order thinking in Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Moral Reflection and Human Value

Some students also employed symbols like a dove and a person turning back time to express general life lessons. One student mentioned peace and love, and tried to symbolize how the protagonist did not seek any revenge towards the real murderer with a symbol of a dove. Another student used a picture of a person turning back time to symbolize the moral value he found in the story, which is to be kind to one another because “we don't have much time in this earth..”. It is in line with one of the main objectives of bringing literature to the classroom, which is to encourage ethical reasoning and self-reflection (Beach, 1993). Deepening their moral awareness would also be a result of student-generated symbolism since they were encouraged to give reflective and creative responses to the literary works (Ishak et al., 2017).

Based on the results, it can be seen that one student grasped different meanings of the story given to another student. The diversity of the meanings here is evidence of how meaning can be created because of the collaboration between the text and the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). By giving them a chance to respond, the literary works would encourage them to be more critic and creative (Febriani, 2019; Garzón & Castañeda-Peña, 2015). This approach in teaching literature is actually aligned with

Bloom’s taxonomy. Instead of merely identifying what symbols already exist in a story, the students were encouraged to generate new symbols, interpreting their understanding of the story. Allowing students to generate visual symbols encouraged personal engagement and interpretive ownership, which is in line with Kesler’s study (2010) That visual reader responses position students as active meaning-makers.

Creating meaning through multiple semiotic sources is also in line with the multimodal perspective (Kress, 2010). The visual representations allowed students to express abstract concepts such as forgiveness, injustice and divine justice that might be difficult to express through language alone in the EFL context. This finding actually supports previous studies that found how multimodal responses could enhance students’ interpretive and confidence (Freyn, 2017; Ghazali, 2008). From a multimodal perspective, students coordinated visual and linguistic resources to construct symbolic meaning. Students’ written explanations served as the foundation for the interpretations of the visual pictures, which were not interpreted in isolation. One student, for instance, described how “when the waves crash, it is like the moment Aksionov releases his burden by forgiving” (Student 7). The student was able to convey an abstract emotional process that might be challenging to communicate through language alone in an EFL situation by using the visual metaphor of waves in conjunction with linguistic explanation. The use of both verbal and visual integration to create meaning could support a previous study (Freyn, 2017) which found that multimodal process could enhance students’ comprehension and interpretive depth.

Furthermore, it also encourages students’ higher-order thinking. The evidences are (1) many students go beyond what is explicitly stated in the text and draw their own conclusions (e.g., interpreting “a cage” as emotional imprisonment), (2) the students can think in metaphors (e.g, an hourglass, a blooming flower), and (3) the students can reflect moral aspects of the story (e.g., Aksionov forgave the real murderer). The diversity of symbolic representations created by the students also supports previous studies suggesting that student-generated symbolism could foster deeper literary engagement; the students would go beyond the surface level of understanding and actively reinterpret the themes (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1994). Similarly. Pantaleo (2002) found that learners’ symbolic illustrations revealed sophisticated interpretive reasoning and emotional involvement with texts. The present finding actually aligns with the study as the students were able to reinterpret the moral of the story through symbols in their own understanding.

The fact that the students were able to interpret using emotional and moral understanding suggests that student-generated symbolism could encourage personal connection to the text given. Garzón and Castañeda-Peña (2015) argued that reader response approaches increase students’ motivation and openness to multiple interpretations. The student-generated symbolism also allowed students to be more confident, especially in expressing their ideas visually and reflectively (Kinasih, 2020). This empowerment is very important for EFL students because some may lack the confidence to speak up or share personal interpretations. Therefore, student-generated symbolism as a reader response task might worth to try in the literature class.

CONCLUSION

This current study attempted to demonstrate that student-generated symbolism is an effective approach to bring literature into the classroom, especially in EFL classrooms. Allowing EFL students to create their own symbols in responding to a literary text would improve not only comprehension of the text, but also their confidence, which is very crucial for EFL students. The thematic analysis

showed that the students can grasp the meaning of the short story “God Sees the Truth but Waits” in diverse ways. Moreover, the approach supports higher-order thinking, including inference, metaphorical reasoning, and moral judgments. Importantly, student-generated symbolism provided an opportunity to engage to the literary works more confidently and creatively. Based on the findings, student-generated symbolism is recommended as an engaging strategy to bring literature effectively to the EFL classroom. The study also contributes to the growing body of multimodal research by illustrating that visual and verbal modes are not competing alternatives but mutually reinforcing resources. When students draw, select or design symbols, and then describe their meaning in writing, it could actually deepen their comprehension of the text given.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The research involved a relatively small number of participants and focused on one short literary text. Consequently, the findings are not intended to be generalized across all EFL contexts. Additionally, the researcher’s dual role as instructor and researcher may have influenced the data, although efforts were made to minimize bias. Future research may be needed to explore student-generated symbolism across different literary genres and a larger number of participants.

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