

## From Reading a Text to Becoming the Text: Towards Deeper Engagement in Philippine Literature through Reader Response–Subjective Interpretation in a Tertiary Context

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### ABSTRACT

*Literature, as an academic resource, encourages reflection, cultural appreciation, and language awareness. In Philippine tertiary classrooms, it also deepens critical thinking and affirms identity by connecting with Filipino students' lived realities. To facilitate such an experience, a streamlined, structured instructional approach is essential to promote a deeper and more engaging reading process. Without such an approach, responses may be constrained in depth and articulation. The present study contends that Bleich's (2019) method of subjective interpretation, streamlined in this context as an instructional model, fosters an accessible and supportive learning experience. The study begins by assessing the quality of readers' responses in the absence of a framework as they engage with Edilberto Tiempo's Philippine short story "The Witch," and then advances to refining these responses through the application of Bleich's framework. Specifically, it is a qualitative inquiry analysing the students' evaluation of their own subjective interpretation experience. The results gathered from a representative sample of Philippine Literature students from a Philippine State University in the Visayas region revealed that, compared to the freely written readers' response, the subjective interpretation was more elaborate and expressive. The framework prompted students to think beyond mere emotional reactions, with many referencing their personal experiences and cultural practices while demonstrating an awareness of language. The study concludes that a structured reader response pedagogical framework empowers students to engage with Philippine literature more deeply by anchoring interpretation with collective identities and lived experiences through a collaborative learning community where their voices are as valued as the text itself.*

*Keywords: Reader Response; Subjective Interpretation; Literary Criticism; Teaching Philippine Literature; Communal Interpretation*

### INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a rich resource for understanding the complexity of human behaviour, offering insights into our inner beings, the dynamics of relationships, and the mechanisms of societal influences. Reading texts and verbalising impressions of them are integral to daily interactions. Through these exchanges, ideas, beliefs, and emotions shape people's relationships with others as well as their identity construction. In the Philippine context, specifically the tertiary-level classroom, literature by local writers cultivates Filipino students' empathy and understanding by engaging in discussions about their social and cultural realities, values, and identity.

For some Filipino college students, however, especially those who may find it challenging to articulate their reactions, a piece of literature may not immediately resonate beyond a free-flowing, mere *knowing* of the literal meaning. Such a limitation presents an opportunity for a literature teacher to guide students towards a more profound understanding of the characters, such as their desires and conflicts, as well as the themes. The lack of extensive pedagogical expertise in

facilitating such an experience may pose a challenge for some English arts teachers tasked with teaching literature without specialised training in the subject (Sroka et al., 2022). This present study, therefore, proposes the use of a simplified pedagogical framework designed to encourage deeper involvement and transformative, critical learning, facilitating a more practical and reflective approach to teaching Philippine literature. This pedagogical structure fosters a safe space for literature students to express thoughts and establish deeper connections with characters and their stories, integrating insights and perspectives into their own Filipino consciousness, worldview, and behaviour.

The simple yet practical structure referenced is adapted from David Bleich's (2019) *reader response* approach called *subjective interpretation* (henceforth RRSI). This pedagogical framework posits that the reader's response itself constitutes the text – it is the reader's reality, as the essence of the text permeates their own identity or way of thinking. Studies on the use of reader response in literature classrooms at the tertiary level and among young adults note how these generally utilise guide questions (Junejo & Shaikh, 2021; Rahimipour, 2019), employ content analysis (Narciso & Partosa, 2014), or focus on particular literary features and devices (Ahmad & Khalid, 2022). Some studies aim to improve students' reader response writing abilities (Gopal & Lee, 2023; Iskhak et al., 2017).

However, few studies (Mailloux, 1979; Subhan, 2021; Trisnawati, 2007) have explored the pedagogical merits of the RRSI approach. The current study found these to be very limited, particularly regarding the application of communal interpretation, i.e., collaborative meaning-making, proposed by Bleich (2019). The present study seeks to address this gap by suggesting that communal interpretation can be done through negotiations of meaning, involving small-group to large-group to class-wide discussions, all aimed at arriving at a shared interpretation of the text. To Bleich, interpretation should extend beyond a personal, internal process, as meaning and understanding are constructed with a community of learners.

Because the RRSI framework has been criticised for its lack of a pedagogical structure (Mailloux, 1979) that is organised yet flexible and capable of adapting to the responses and needs of students (Adu et al., 2024), the current study proposes a pedagogical application of Bleich's theoretical framework with a straightforward structure and method for understanding how meaning is constructed from literary texts, without sacrificing the rudiments of accessible and facilitative learning experience. Using this approach in the Philippine literature tertiary classroom will spare students from engaging with texts in an overly technical and complex way, which can be demotivating (Lazar, 1993). Students will come to understand that meaning emerges from the reader themselves through an ongoing process of interpreting, revising, and negotiating with co-learners.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study's main aim is to demonstrate that, given an interpretive framework that encourages responses to a literary text, students can share deeper and more elaborate responses. It further aims to show that employing a strategy that allows them to negotiate their analysis with peers will enhance their critical thinking skills. To achieve such objectives, the study seeks to answer the main question: How does the use of the RRSI framework develop students' responses to a work of Philippine literature? This main question is broken down into the following supporting questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the tertiary students' free, unguided literary analysis of the Philippine short story "The Witch" by Edilberto Tiempo, and what are the characteristics of their RRSI – perceptual, affective and associative responses to this?
2. What are the differences between how students evaluate their experience of literary analysis without and with the RRSI framework?
3. What common responses emerged through the students' communal interpretation?
4. What are the implications of the differences between their level of engagement, both without and with the RRSI framework?

## READER RESPONSE AS A TOOL FOR ACTIVE READING

Reading literature produces independent thinking human beings capable of making decisions through critical evaluation. It is a cognitive-constructive lifelong skill developed by exploring texts to establish meaning and intention (Rosenblatt, 1995). The actual reading process involves two elements – the text and the reader – in order to produce an offspring: that is, meaning. Meaning is a network of relations residing in the text waiting for the reader, who has a repertoire of experiences, to actualise (Selden et al., 2017). This basis of the reader response theory is in clear opposition to New Criticism and its formal principles, which promoted the idea that meaning lies in the text alone (Guerin et al., 2005; Tyson, 2006) and that the author has implanted the text's meaning, which therefore cannot be altered by the reader's response.

Among the earliest reader response critics were Rosenblatt and Booth. In 1933, Rosenblatt published *Literature as Exploration* and theorised reading as a transaction (efferent and aesthetic) between the reader and the text. She argued that the information in the text stimulates the reader toward an experience from which social insights may arise. Booth (1963) added to this view in *The Rhetorical Stance*, arguing that the reader's engagement with a text is shaped by the rhetorical strategies employed by the author. To Booth, the text employs rhetorical resources as "the author's means of controlling his reader" (p. xiii), influencing the stance or attitude to adopt during their interaction with the text. This concept of reading experience is further explored by Rosenblatt in her seminal work *The Reader, the text, the Poem* (1978), later expanded upon in the updated edition of *Literature as Exploration* (Rosenblatt, 1995). In her Transactional Reader Response model, Rosenblatt conceptualises reading as a dynamic transaction encompassing both the efferent and aesthetic modes of engagement between the reader and the text. Efferent reading focuses on extracting information from the text, while aesthetic reading centres on the immersive experience of reading, where the reader lives through the text in the moment. Rosenblatt posits that the text's content stimulates the reader toward an experience from which deeper social meanings may emerge.

However, meaning is not the only response created by the reader. The Phenomenological Approach to reader response developed by Iser (1978) in his work *The Act of Reading* asserts that a deeper implication of meaning is its effect. He argues that the text produces an effect, as it has two poles: artistic, i.e., created by the author, and aesthetic, i.e., realised by the reader; between these poles is meaning "the reader is supposed to visualise" (p. 35). Meaning, therefore, is an experience rather than an object to be defined, which means that texts need readers to bring them to life. The effect is experienced because elements in the text concretise the reader's social, political, and cultural dispositions that were otherwise abstract in the text. The reader's response to the text is the meaning constructed and the effect experienced.

The effect of the text's content is further explored by Fish in his influential work *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), in which he asserts that specific stylistic features of the text directly impact the reader. This model of reader-response is called Affective Stylistics, which argues that the stylistic features evoke particular responses, which, in turn, shape how meaning is constructed. Fish emphasises that this process involves active reading, where the reader navigates through the text, continuously creating and revising an understanding of its meaning based on textual cues. This dynamic interaction leads to the formation of both cognitive and emotional effects.

Fowler (1991) emphasises the point that the active reader creates the text as much as the author does; he asserts that reading is inherently aesthetic: the text only truly exists in the act of reading. When this occurs, it transforms into a personal experience that becomes profoundly powerful – it speaks of the world, it speaks of its social and cultural landscape as understood and realised by the reader and co-readers. In other words, being active means that the reader not only engages with the text but also with the community of readers. To supplement this, Bleich (1975, 2019) advocates the Subjective Interpretation to reader response, where a transition happens: the reading shifts focus from the text itself to the reader's interaction with it and from the reader's individual reading identity to the co-readers' multiple perspectives. His subjective interpretation involves a communal interpretation, which is particularly relevant to the study of collaborative, culturally aware, and context-sensitive approach to meaning-making, which is why it was chosen for this study of Philippine Literature at the tertiary level, where students are exposed to provocative social issues and engage in critical discussions as a social exercise.

The reader response approach has not been without its critics. Febriani et al. (2022), in their study on lecturers' perceptions of the implementation of teaching approaches to literature, argue that while such an approach improves students' reflective writing skills, it also requires considerable time and energy to manage effectively. They add that reader response could potentially overlook authorial intent and may be difficult to assess due to its subjective nature. In response to this, Ha and Huertos-Abril (2024) suggest that subjective interpretation be complemented by the approaches of Fish (1980) and Iser (1978) that highlight the interplay between reader identity and textual features to closely analyse the text, thereby linking the interpretation of text to the author's intended purpose.

Adopting a framework for effective reading is fundamental in promoting reading agency, where readers construct critical thinking, understand various perspectives, and build their own arguments (Ha & Huertos-Abril, 2024). To do so, Frijters et al. (2008) assert the necessity of education in critical thinking skills of logical consistency and self-reflective reasoning. Hence, the current study adopts Bleich's (2019) subjective interpretation and refines this with a pedagogical structure to enrich its functional significance.

## RELATED STUDIES USING READER-RESPONSE THEORY IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Research exploring reader response within the context of a tertiary-level literature classroom examines the process of meaning-making through the use of literary features and devices (Ahmad & Khalid, 2022) and guide questions (Junejo & Shaikh, 2021; Rahimipour, 2019). These studies demonstrate that a focused interpretation of specific literary elements and strategic use of guide questions enhance both aesthetic and efferent stances. In turn, students carefully analyse the text and its components while drawing connections to their personal experiences and prior knowledge.

Examining these connections can uncover patterns of interpretive inclination. For example, Narciso and Partosa (2014) observed one such inclination in their students' reflections on the Philippine short story "Faith, Love, Time, and Dr Lazaro" by Gregorio Brillantes: These tended to show a reluctance to accept the character's loss of faith and an avoidance of addressing the underlying issues that shaped the character's behaviour. The concept of interpretive inclination in reader response is further supported by the notion that readers engage with literature through knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming. In his study of the written responses of 106 randomly selected students, Rahmat (2023) found a positive correlation between these two modes of knowledge engagement.

Most research on reader response connects the theory to the development of critical thinking skills, particularly when the activity is collaborative (Pasaribu & Iswandari, 2019). This observation is further reinforced when these skills are cultivated through practice application, such as journaling, which provides a reflective space for deeper engagement with the text. In a study that gathered students' perceptions on the impact of reader response journals, Gopal and Lee (2023) found that students reported becoming more critical and motivated in their approach to reading. Iskhak et al. (2017) arrived at the same conclusion and added that students' writing also gradually improved in terms of schematic structure. However, a different result emerged when the journal reflection was unguided. Matheson et al. (2017) showed in their analysis of unguided journals that the responses were longer and explored a wider range of topics.

Among the related studies reviewed, only two employed Bleich's (1975, 2019) subjective interpretation framework. In one such study, Subhan (2021) presented three poems for student analysis, with a majority of the students selecting Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay." Subhan argued that the poem's theme of age, youth, and nature, as revealed through the resymbolization analysis, i.e., inferring how the text says what it says, was the primary reason for its selection. However, the study did not extend to the communal interpretation aspect of Bleich's framework.

The challenge of aggregating individual responses into a common interpretation is a significant criticism that Mailloux (1979) raised regarding Bleich's framework. In an effort to determine a possible strategy toward achieving a common interpretation, Trisnawati (2007) demonstrated a technique in her study of Virginia Woolf's "The Legacy." Focusing on the issue of marital affairs, she made a collective interpretation of the text based on her readers' affective and associative responses: 1) that the main character's affair seemed unsurprising given her unhappy marriage, and 2) that the readers' responses to Angela's affair were shaped by their personal proximity to her – one reader was unable to agree or disagree due to her own experience with an affair, while other readers took clear stances on the matter. Trisnawati concluded that a reader's subjective motives directly relate to the production of meaning.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BLEICH'S READER RESPONSE-SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

A reader's access to the world generally has a subjective motive. Subjective interpretation, as Bleich (2019) posits, elucidates the belief that all knowledge comes from a perceiver and that truth is constructed by people to address specific needs in a given situation. Bleich explains that in reading, readers read the text, a real object with which they are expected to respond, speak or write about. Bleich's response consists of three phases: *symbolization* (perceptual response), *resymbolization* (affective and associative responses), and *communal interpretation* (Figure 1).



Symbolization begins with a response statement – a product of perception (thus, a perceptual response) wherein the reader converts the real object (the text) into a symbolic one. A response statement answers *what the text says*, thereby creating a conceptual world. However, a response does not end with a perception of the text’s message. It is followed by resymbolization, which allows the reader to explain *how the text says it*. The reader connects the text to actual feelings (thus affective responses) encountered in the act of reading to provide context and visualise the conceptual world. Muller-Wood (2014) argues that such a response emanates from understanding human emotions or the motivation of authors and readers of literature. Resymbolization also associates the response statement with personal experiences, cultural practices, and behaviour (thus associative responses), among others, that relate the text to the reader’s socio-cultural world. A culturally-responsive reading, according to Vaughn et al. (2019), enhances content knowledge and leverages content reading comprehension.

However, Bleich believes that knowledge arises from a community of people seeking truth to reflect social structures and address specific needs. He advocates for a communal approach to interpreting texts, called *communal interpretation*, suggesting that such a collective process is essential to fully realising the readers' response. Such a process, according to Bleich (2019), begins by converting the response statements into a collectively agreed-upon *purpose*, serving as the starting point of the subjective inputs, where all the negotiated meanings emerge.

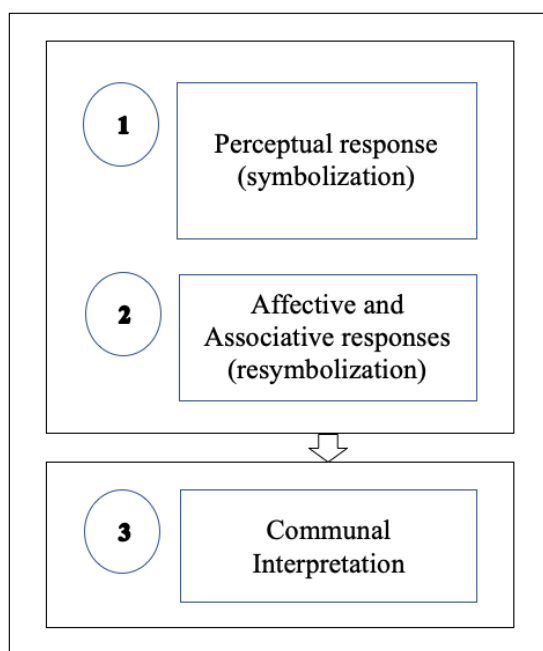


FIGURE 1. Bleich’s (2019) reader response-subjective interpretation

This three-phase subjective interpretation framework serves as the basis for the research design to explore how reading experience can be more engaging, context-specific, and personally meaningful in a Philippine literature classroom at the tertiary level.

## METHOD

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

To achieve the study's aims of demonstrating the usefulness of an interpretative framework and using Bleich's RRSI framework for encouraging critical responses from students, and to address the study's research questions about the students' responses and interpretations, the study employed a qualitative design. The data were collected from Philippine Literature students at a Philippine State University in the Visayas region. The students provided 1) a written free, unguided reader response to the assigned short story and 2) a revised version of it using the RRSI (perceptual, affective, and associative responses) framework. The responses were analysed using the parameters of core message conveyed, common core topics, and length of response. An evaluation of the reader response exercises was done through a focus group discussion (henceforth FGD) with nine (9) randomly selected students. The data gathered from the FGD were subjected to thematic analysis.

Before engaging the students in responding to the short story, the teacher strategically introduced the text through a pre-reading activity. Visuals of the story's characters were displayed on the board, prompting students to make predictions about the potential storyline. Following this, the teacher instructed the students to read the story silently. Then, she reread the story aloud, meticulously employing appropriate reading techniques, such as voice modulation, expression, and emphasis, to facilitate an immersive reading experience. Afterwards, the entire class unpacked the fundamental elements of the story. However, no further discussion ensued, as such an exchange could have interfered with the students' independent analysis of the text.

The following procedure was then conducted:

*Collection of the free, unguided responses.* The students were instructed to write their interpretation of the story in class within a 40-minute timeframe. They were encouraged to reflect on but not limit themselves to the following: *what the story is conveying to them* and *how it conveys that message*. This type of reflective analysis is typical of their usual reading practice. Their responses were collected thereafter, encoded to count the number of words, and analysed to determine the core message, common core topics, and length of response.

*Collection of the RRSI.* The same students were instructed to revise their analyses within another forty (40) minutes, guided by the following questions: *What does the story convey*, and *how is this message communicated?* *What effect does the story and its message have on me?* *What does the story and its message remind me of?* The responses were collected, encoded, and analysed to determine the core message, common core topics, and length of response.

*Collection of communal interpretation.* This activity consisted of three stages (Figure 2):

1. *Small group negotiation.* The students were instructed to negotiate their responses within small groups of five members. In this context, negotiation involved reconciling any disagreements to reach a consensus. The primary objective was for the group to formulate a unified response.
2. *Larger group negotiation.* They were then asked to form larger groups of fifteen members to continue negotiating their responses. The objective of formulating a common response through a consensus remained.

3. *Class-wide negotiation.* Finally, the negotiations took place with the entire class, led by a designated class leader who facilitated the discussion. Three students were assigned as scribes, tasked to record the class's common response and validate each other's notes. At the end of the session, the scribes presented the recorded common response to the entire class. During this stage, the teacher-researcher also closely observed the students' negotiation activity and recorded her observations in notes.

*Focus group discussion.* The FGD aimed to evaluate the reading experience in the free, unguided interpretation on the one hand, and the guided (subjective) interpretation on the other. The evaluation focused on the variations between their responses, as well as critically assessed the value of the RRSI framework and how it enhanced their mental processing as learners and negotiation skills as members of a learning community. It was conducted a week after the communal negotiation occurred in the classes. The FGD was transcribed, coded to reveal common categories, and analysed to uncover emerging themes.

#### THE PROPOSED SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION PEDAGOGICAL STRUCTURE

Bleich's (1975, 2019) subjective interpretation of the reader response theory is primarily theoretical in nature. A concrete pedagogical structure or specific procedure for implementing such an approach in the literature classroom had not been established (Mailloux, 1979). Hence, the current study proposes a pedagogical structure that is based on the subjective interpretation model (Figure 2).

Following this structure, a class of tertiary students begins by setting the mood for the story, and then proceeds with the actual reading. Students then move on to *knowledge-telling*, discussing the fundamental elements of the story, such as the characters and plot. No further analysis is introduced at this stage to avoid interfering with students' initial understanding of the text. Drawing on Bleich's theory of subjective interpretation, the study progresses with *knowledge-transforming*, where the basic tenet that students' comprehension is most effectively shown through their individual written responses to the story is materialised. This stage begins with formulating a response statement (symbolization, perceptual response), expounding on this with explanations (resymbolization) of feelings (affective response) and experiences and prior knowledge (associative response). Moreover, following the advice of Ha and Huertos-Abril (2024), the proposed RRSI pedagogical structure integrates the reader response models of Fish (1980) and Iser (1978), particularly in terms of recognising textual features in order to link readers' responses with the author's intent.



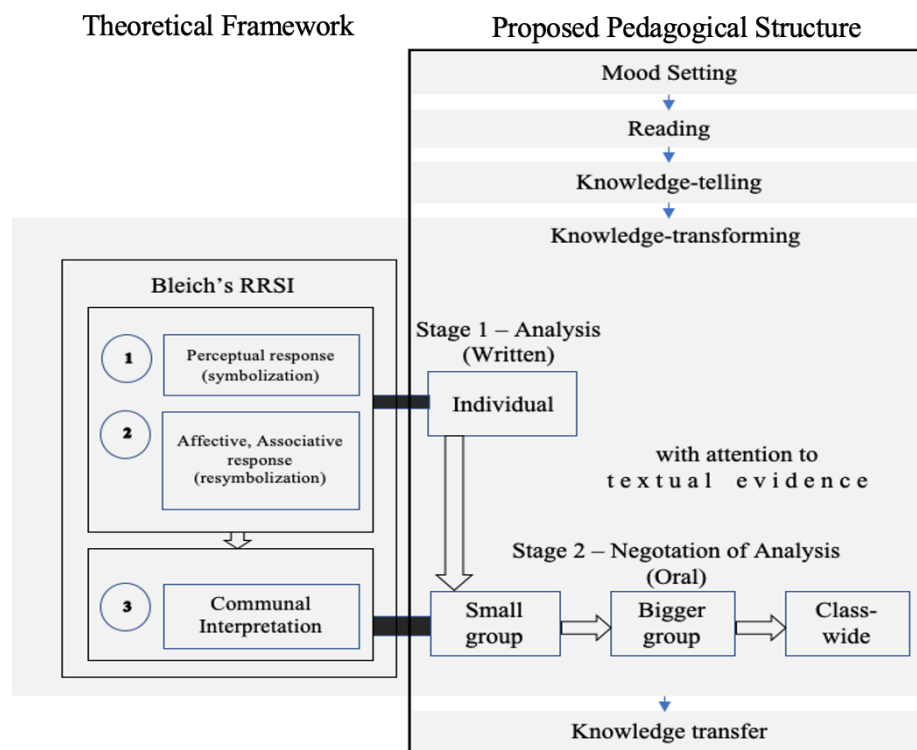


FIGURE 2. Proposed pedagogical structure based on Bleich's (2019) subjective interpretation framework

What follows are small-group, to bigger-group, to class-wide oral discussions and negotiations to explore the subjective meanings of the text. The aim is to reach a consensus of responses. The learning experience ends with *language transfer*, where the readers take the world of the literary text to other exciting, related works of art.

#### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND STUDY LOCALE

The study involved the entire population of 165 Philippine Literature students who were in their first, second, and third levels enrolled at the time of the study. Nine (9) of them were randomly selected to participate in the FGD. These students belonged to classes within similar programs – BS in Information Technology, BS in Office Systems Management, BS in Hospitality Management, and Bachelor of Elementary Education. The students studied the story as a class curricular content requirement under the theme *The Filipino Community: Transgressions, Mysteries, and Adventures*.

The study was conducted at a Philippine State University in the Central Visayas region. The selected story for analysis featured the region, ensuring the students' cultural familiarity with the text's context, facilitating their understanding of the story and participation in the discussion of it.

## THE SHORT STORY

The short story used for this study was Edilberto Tiempo's "The Witch" (1970), set in Libas, Leyte, a province in Eastern Visayas, Philippines. The story features a boy, the unnamed first-person narrator, who visits his *Tio* (Uncle) Sabelo and hears stories about Minggay Awok, an old woman. She is said to be a witch living alone in a hut behind the creek, near a *balete* (banyan) tree. Townsfolk speak of how she keeps eerie animals as pets, the *wakwak* and *sigbin*, known in Philippine folktales for their association with dark mysticism. There is also gossip about her escaping unscathed from attempts to kill and burn her, and of children developing skin rashes after crossing paths with her.

One morning, the boy goes to the creek to catch shrimps for his mother and encounters a kind old woman. His friendly interaction with her makes him comfortable in her presence. However, when he realises that she is Minggay Awok, he suddenly feels frightened. At the end of the story, the boy looked at the shrimps' protruding eyes staring back at him and imagined them as the witch's eyes. Startled, he quickly throws them back into the creek.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### FREE, UNGUIDED READERS' RESPONSE

An analysis of the students' free, unguided responses revealed responses that are shorter, with core topics that are limited, and with the message that *judging a person based on physical appearance and without proof is beneath respectful conduct* (Table 1).

TABLE 1. Free unguided response to the Philippine short story "The Witch"

| Message   | Core Topics  | Length of response |
|---|--|--------------------|
| <i>Not all [that] we see and hear without proper evidence is true, we can't just judge a person by what we hear and his/her appearance...</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• judge</li> <li>• physical appearance</li> </ul> | 90-110 words       |
| <i>...To me, the message of the story is to not judge a person based on his/her appearance and solitary lifestyle.</i>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• absence of proof</li> </ul>                     |                    |
| <i>We cannot easily judge the person based on physical appearance...</i>  |  |                    |

The observation contrasts with Matheson et al.'s (2017) position that unguided student reflections tend to be longer and encompass a broader array of topics, possibly due to the inclusion of reflection prompts. Matheson et al. argued that prompts are effective in steering student reflections toward desired themes.

### THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF FREE, UNGUIDED READERS' RESPONSE EXPERIENCE

#### ANALYSIS LIMITED TO EMOTIONAL RESONANCE OF THE STORY

The students' evaluation of their free, unguided literary analysis revealed that such analysis readily elicits affective-oriented responses (Appendix, Table 1). This pattern occurs because readers often find connections with the characters and the conflicts and dilemmas they confront. These connections lead to discovering interpretive inclinations (Narciso & Partosa, 2014) and realising

subjective motive (Trisnawati, 2007). Hence, Muller-Wood (2014) argues that if a reader's response arises from emotions, it should progress to understanding the source of that emotion – be it rhetorical effect, specific in-text events, or personal background arising from the immersive reading experience. One student noted the need to do so, stating:

I just expressed what I felt about the story or certain circumstances in the story. I didn't appreciate the need to support it with evidence or details from the story [in terms of what] made me feel that way to make my response more credible.

(P5)

#### SENSE-MAKING THROUGH FRAGMENTED, UNREFINED THOUGHTS

The students' feedback further revealed a response that is characteristically fragmented in nature (Appendix, Table 1), perhaps because reading and writing about a literary text may be less authentic. These tasks do not typically align with the informal, spontaneous discussions people engage in with peers about social issues and human relationships (VanDerHeide et al., 2023). Given that literary analysis requires a specialised skill set, students may need to be guided to read carefully, think critically, and connect ideas in a logical manner. Otherwise, they may find themselves feeling incapable or demotivated, as illustrated in the responses below:

Our writing of ideas is directionless. We do not know what to write first and then what next.

(P2)

I didn't know what to start creating. I didn't know how to organise my thoughts so that I could say everything that I want[ed] to convey about the story.

(P3)

Without proper scaffolding, students may struggle to connect isolated events and intended meanings and distinguish between surface-level observations and deeper interpretations. This reading experience is noted by the students, saying:

My reactions to the text were only those insights that came out randomly.

(P6)

I would react only to that single part of the story that made an impact.

(P7)

The lack of refinement not only diminishes the quality of the analysis but also fails to foster a more meaningful engagement with the text.

#### REACTIONS UNANCHORED, DISCONNECTED FROM THE NARRATIVE

The students also found that their responses rendered insufficient support of textual evidence (Appendix, Table A). As a result, the analysis was disjointed. Absence of textual support may decontextualise interpretation and could fail to engage meaningfully with the narrative's deeper themes, development of the character, or plot structure. Hence, readers must justify the meaning created based on textual evidence (Graves et al., 2011) because a literary analysis that is disconnected from the story may focus on vague impressions or thoughts detached from the text itself. In relation to this, one student remarked:

There is less thought in the reaction. I would react only in [*sic*] a single part of the story that I understand. I wouldn't connect events or look at the story as a whole.

(P4)

In general, the free, unguided readers' response may negatively impact the quality of the literary analysis. Therefore, the teacher's role in employing the reader response approach is vital in critical and in-depth analyses. Spirovska (2019) argues that the teacher should focus on designing a guided classroom experience that enables students to build up group and individual understanding of the text produced through writing or speaking. A literature class, where emotions and experiences are recognised as essential in readers' responses, provides an excellent opportunity to enhance students' productive skills, particularly in relation to the development of content and organisation of ideas.

#### READER RESPONSE–SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION: INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTUAL, AFFECTIVE, AND ASSOCIATIVE RESPONSES

An analysis of the students' subjective interpretation revealed longer responses, with wider core topics, and the message that *fabricating stories will harm the person involved*. Their interpretation showed the prevalence of the phrase *not to judge*. It occurred 123 times, while the word *judge* occurred an additional 133 times. For instance, the students' RRSI contained remarks such as:

Do not judge a person based on his/her appearance and solitary lifestyle.

We should not judge other people easily by their physical appearance.

We cannot blindly judge a person based on a narrative told, regardless of how popular it is.

Let us not judge someone based on the words of others.

The students perceived the underlying message (Table 2) as the response statement. The response statement, therefore, typically reflects the story-intended values, principles, and insights that, according to Limone and Toto (2022, p. 1), “evolve under the influence of interpersonal relationships” and are “fostered by social interactions and environmental factors” that shape our emotions.

TABLE 2. Subjective interpretation of the Philippine short story “The Witch”

| Message   | Core Topics  | Length of response |
|---|--|--------------------|
| <i>It is not good to believe in rumors...</i><br><i>Making up stories is not a good characteristic, and such thing will have a big effect on an individual who is being judged.</i><br><i>We should not believe without proof because it may cause harm to the person to whom you are referring</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rumors, made-up stories</li> <li>• judge</li> <li>• without proof</li> <li>• feelings of fear, harm, sadness, and disdain</li> <li>• experiences</li> <li>• beliefs and principles</li> </ul> | 700-800 words      |

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EVALUATION OF THE READER RESPONSE–SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

### HOLISTIC AND EVIDENCE-BASED ORGANIZATION OF IDEAS

The students' evaluation of their responses on the use of the RRSI framework recognised the framework as efficient in organising ideas and supporting holistic and evidence-based literary interpretation (Appendix, Table B). Adopting such a framework fosters reading agency, producing readers who think critically and construct arguments effectively (Ha & Huertos-Abril, 2024). Two students remarked:

The framework made us pay attention to and put emphasis on certain details that are important in the story. I used to just focus on an aspect that brought the strongest emotion and overshadowed other emotions and details. The framework allowed me to look at the story in [*sic*] multiple perspectives.

(P8)

The activity made us organise our thoughts clearly. It made us fully understand the sections in the story in particular [,and] then the entire story in general.

(P7)

Access to a framework, however, does not guarantee immediate improvement in writing ability. It is a consistent practice that refines the skill. Gopal and Lee (2023) and Iskhak et al. (2017) observed through their study of students' journaling practices that students gradually became more critical and motivated in their reading. They also showed improvement in the schematic structure of their writing.

### SELF-REFLECTIVE GROWTH WHILE IMMERSING IN VISCERAL CONNECTION

The RRSI framework, according to the students, promotes self-reflective growth and helps establish visceral connection (Appendix, Table B). It employs an introspective approach that encourages readers to not only analyse the text but also reflect on their thought processes, biases and reactions. These reactions emerge because readers are immersed in linking the text to intuition – a process which actualises the meaning of the text (Selden et al., 2017), prompting an emotional engagement with the characters, themes, and conflicts. One student said:

What happened in the story is a reality, and because of that, we can observe, read, and find it through other people's stories. Through that we are able to understand the story because it's the reality[;] it is happening.

(P9)

Expressing the self in reading literature deepens our engagement with the story and enhances our emotional connection to the characters and themes. Muller-Wood (2014) argues that human emotions guide, trigger, and release rational thinking. Another student remarked that:

If we integrate our emotions and personal experiences, we are able to express ourselves better and more effectively as active readers.

(P2)

Moreover, by allowing ourselves to respond emotionally, we gain a deeper understanding not only of the story's emotional resonance but also its motives, thereby influencing the ethical decision-making process (Liuna et al., 2024). As one student shared:



It is important that we evaluate our principles in life. Literature allows us to do so.

(P1)

In summary, the use of the RRSI framework not only enriches students' reading experience but also promotes personal growth. The reader benefits from reading as a memorable personal experience (Fowler, 1991), allowing literature to reverberate long after the reading.

#### COMMUNAL INTERPRETATION

The study observed that the students' communal response statement - "Do not judge a person based on physical appearance, lifestyle, rumours, biases, or accusations, especially without truly knowing them" – has an imperative tone. It discourages the act of judging people based on mere perception (Figure 2) as signalled by the following words: *rumours*, *accusations/speculations*, *hearsay*, *bullying*, and *biases*. The students' perceptual response arose from the story's language, which the students themselves noticed. For instance, one student reported in her individual written analysis that:

As we delved into the story, we found textual clues that proved that it was all hearsay [*sic*]. These textual clues can be seen [on] page 1 in the following locations: in paragraph 3, first sentence, paragraph 4, line 1 'It was said,' paragraph 5, line 4 'This man believed,' and paragraph 7, line 2 'Those who claimed.' These clues provide a [*sic*] concrete evidence that it was just all rumours about Minggay being a witch.

The above excerpt presents three things about reading and the character of Minggay being a witch: 1) that a close reading (i.e., *delved into the story*) 2) reveals *clues*, which in this case are linguistic features of narration as in *it was said*, *this man believed*, and *those who claimed*, 3) suggesting that it is *all hearsays* [*sic*] or *rumours*. Such textual interpretation proves that the form of an expression determines the mental representation of aspects of reality that enable human perception and comprehension. This powerful role of form and function is defined vividly by Bleich (2019, p. 71), saying that "language permits a whole series of ordinary animal behaviours to come under the dominion of conscious control and initiative. In fact, language is the means and agency of our characteristic human self-awareness."

According to the students, rather than the story being scary, it made them feel sympathy and empathy for both Minggay and the boy and angry at the townsfolk. This effect is essential because meaning is not merely a concept to be defined; it is in itself the experience (Iser, 1978). Minggay is a victim of two situations: (1) marital abuse and family abandonment, and (2) social persecution. Because of her peculiar way of living, people fabricate stories about her, instigating that she is a witch. However, the innocent boy's personal encounter with her negates the people's telltales, leading the readers to empathise with Minggay and the boy and feel that she is harmless and kind; thus, the theme of horror and disgust resonates in the students' response. One student phrased this emphatically, saying:

It is ironic. The title tells me that this is a horrifying story. But it's not! It's a drama of how people can be at their worst. It's the people who horrified me!

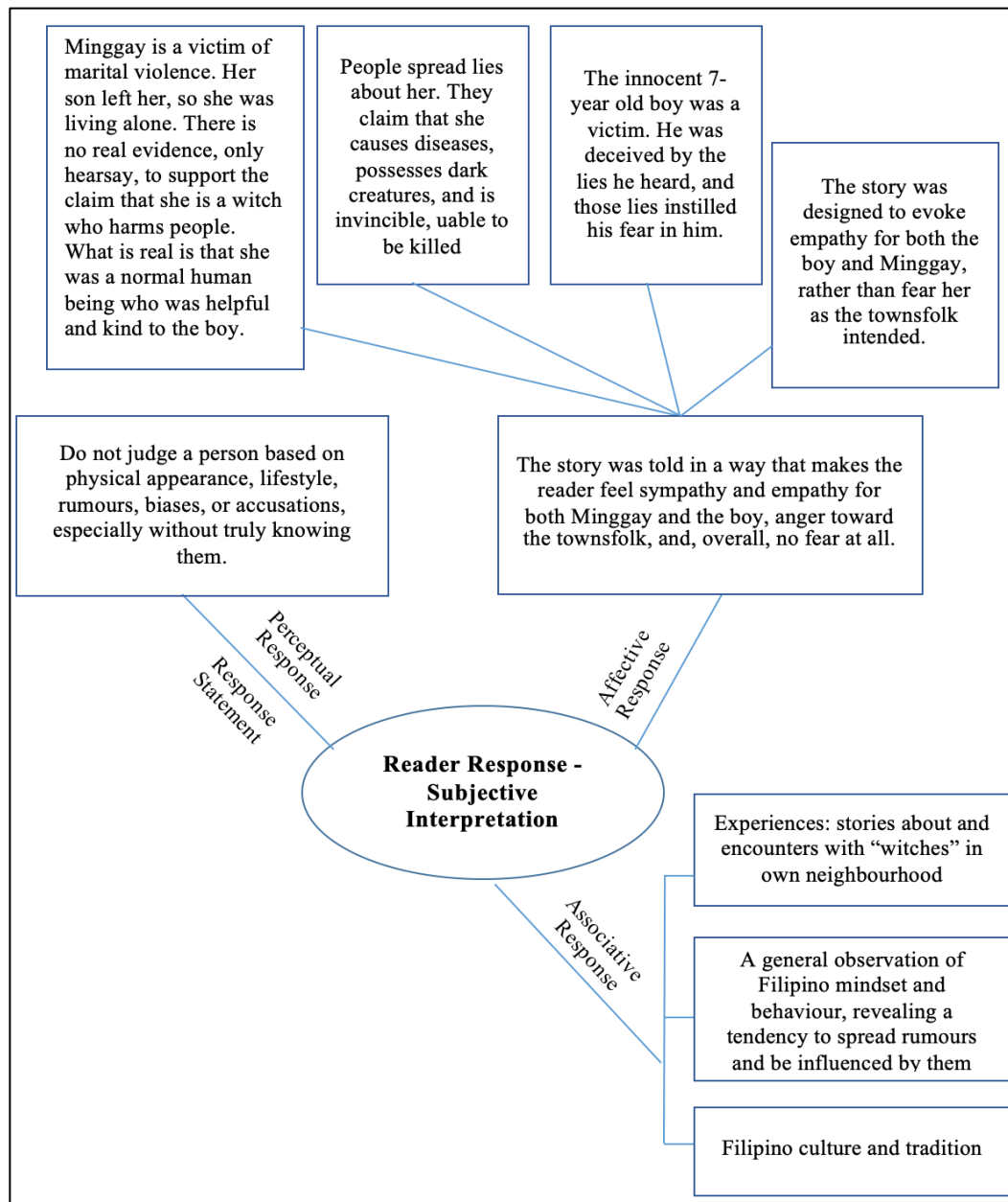


FIGURE 3. Students’ subjective interpretation (communal interpretation) of the Philippine short story “The Witch”

### THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS’ EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNAL INTERPRETATION

#### COGNITIVE EMPATHY AND COLLECTIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

During the FGD, the students expressed that the communal interpretation activity “became the story of us” (P4, P6, P8). It became a narrative of collective experience, reinforcing the idea that integrating personal responses while engaging in thoughtful negotiation with the class fosters a conducive environment in which diverse voices are validated and respected, essential in cultivating a literate mind (Abdullah et al., 2021). Through this process, the readers become the text, and the

communal interpretation hones both their intellect and character, as revealed by the thematic analysis (Appendix, Table B).

Literary interpretation is shaped by social contexts, the entire class as a community of tertiary-level learners, emphasising that the way people understand texts, ideas, and experiences is influenced by the shared practices, norms, and perspectives of the community they are part of. One student shared:

The issues in literature are commonly experienced. If we share our thoughts, the group will create a stronger position, and I think that is powerful.

(P3)

The effect of such an interpretation is rewarding. It produces a more motivating classroom experience, as expressed by the students:

The activity was fun. What we did made us see multiple perspectives and various emotions. If we take the same understanding, then one's interpretation is validated. If they are different, their eyes are opened to the missing piece, the gap in the understanding of the story.

(P9)

I think the process was not easy because we think differently, but when we reached a common understanding[,], it was an awesome accomplishment of the class.

(P3)

Moreover, the sharing of thoughts enhances students' cognitive empathy (Appendix, Table C), which is experienced not only through connecting with the characters but also with co-readers. As learners engage with each other, they share multiple perspectives and, thereby, deepen their understanding of the text and its readers (Keen, 2022), as manifested by one student:

We were able to gather individual thoughts and appreciate the thoughts of others.

(P2)

Cognitive empathy, the ability to understand and recognise the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others, plays a crucial role in fostering efficient collective problem-solving (Appendix, Table C). It enables group members to appreciate not only their own perspectives but also the motivation, constraints and ideas of others, leading to clearer communication and a more inclusive approach to finding solutions. Students explain this strength, saying:

If we listen and share our thoughts about the issues in literature, we are able to educate others and remedy [social] issues, and we eliminate misrepresentations [of people and things involved in] these issues.

(P1)

If we listen to each other, we could create shared solutions.

(P3)

Therefore, communal interpretation not only enhances the understanding of texts but also strengthens the relationship of learners as community members.

SHAPING OF CHARACTER AND REFINEMENT OF SELF-REGULATION

As individuals engage with a group, they exercise openness, patience, and respect for differing opinions, and such exercise develops their character and refines self-regulation (Appendix, Table C). By involving students in a genuine learning community, teachers allow them to develop greater emotional intelligence. In support of this observation, the students noted:

Agreeing on a decision [...] will improve your ability to avoid misunderstanding [...]  
(P6)

It is important that I am exposed to other perspectives. It develops my character.  
(P1)

Communal interpretation provides opportunities for students to refine their emotional and cognitive responses. The process helps them become more mindful of their own responses and more deliberate in their actions, leading to improved self-control and greater emotional resilience in both academic and personal lives (Gil et al., 2016). In relation to this, the students expressed the following about the process:

It develops the skill of justifying my thoughts.  
(P7)

It develops my metacognition[;] we think about how we and others think in order to come up with ideas.  
(P8)

It improves my open-mindedness – you include everyone with the goal in mind: to reach a consensus.  
(P8)

The collaborative process in communal interpretation allows the text to take on new layers of significance, as each reader's perspective influences and enriches the overall interpretation. In this sense, the readers are co-creators of the text's meaning. They participate in a dynamic exchange that merges personal experiences with the collective discourse of the group. Communal interpretation, therefore, seeks to establish a relative truth produced in the process of negotiating meaning.

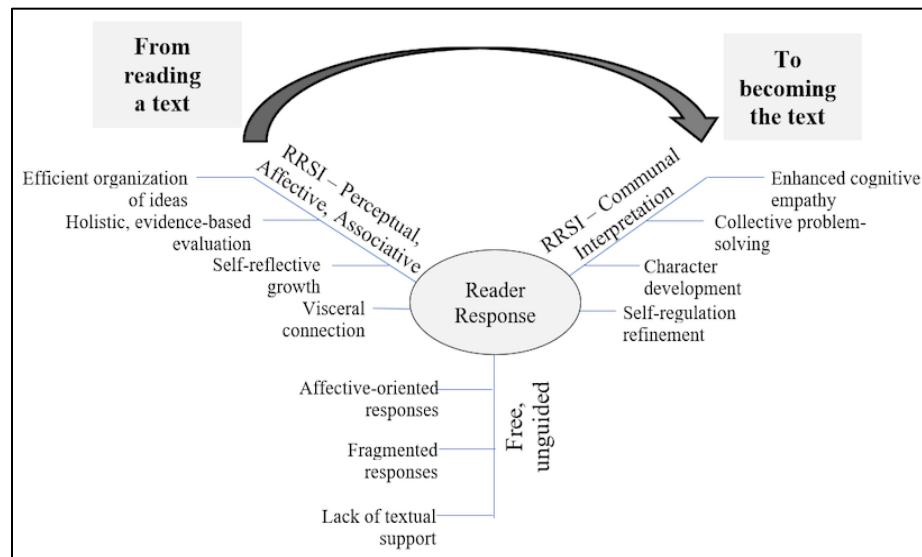


FIGURE 4. From reading a text to becoming the text: Free, unguided and RRSI reading experiences compared

In summary, the students' evaluations highlighted distinct differences in the reading experience between the free, unguided response and the RRSI framework (Appendix, Table A, 2.1, and 3). The free, unguided writing tended to produce a diminished quality of literary analysis (e.g., affective-oriented, fragmented, and unsupported by textual support), while the RRSI approach enriched both the reading experience (e.g., efficient organization of ideas and evocation of visceral connection) and the readers themselves (e.g., character development and enhanced cognitive empathy), sharpening both their intellect and character (Figure 3). These differences also indicate a fundamental shift in the approach to literary analysis. Whereas the individual analysis views the literary text as the primary subject of analysis, the communal interpretation invites readers to view themselves as integral to the interpretive process.

## CONCLUSION

The streamlined reader response–subjective interpretation pedagogical framework, adapted from Bleich's (2019) theoretical model, demonstrated that Philippine literature in a tertiary classroom can transform students' emotional, fragmented, and unrefined responses into more engaging, evidence-based, and character-oriented interpretations, especially when the social and cultural context of the text aligns with the students' lived experiences. It enhances students' thought processes and places them from the text to the centre of the analysis, suggesting that their own evolving identity and experiences are essential to understanding and interpreting literature. This shift encourages a more dynamic and multifaceted perspective to Philippine literature, one in which the students' personal insights become the text, as their role is as significant as the text itself.

Therefore, the reader response–subjective interpretation framework values the readers' overall academic and personal experience. The facilitation of a deeper engagement with Philippine literature encourages Filipino readers to explore their own thoughts and associations and validate them with those of others in order to co-construct new collective meanings and connections. The framework values readers' emotions, improves critical thinking, and strengthens relationships among learners.



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## APPENDIX

TABLE A. Thematic analysis of students' reflections on the free, unguided interpretation

| Code/Keywords/<br>Key phrases   | Categories                          | Themes  |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>response would be based on how I felt immersed in the story</i></li> <li>• <i>What emotions the story made me feel</i></li> <li>• <i>felt about the story</i></li> </ul>  | <p>affective-oriented responses</p> | <p>The free, unguided literary analysis is limited to the emotional resonance of the story.</p>         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>directionless</i></li> <li>• <i>don't know how to organise thoughts</i></li> <li>• <i>don't know what to start creating</i></li> <li>• <i>only those insights that come our randomly</i></li> <li>• <i>wouldn't connect events or look at the story as a whole</i></li> <li>• <i>no proper flow of ideas</i></li> </ul> | <p>Fragmented responses</p>         | <p>The free, unguided literary analysis produces a chaotic dance of fragmented, unrefined thoughts.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>the need to support reactions with details from the story</i></li> <li>• <i>open-ended response without reference to the details in the story</i></li> </ul>  | <p>Lack of textual support</p>      | <p>The unguided literary response leaves reactions unanchored, disconnecting from the narrative.</p>    |

TABLE B. Thematic analysis of students' reflections on the RRSI

| Code/Keywords/<br>Key phrases   | Categories                                    | Themes   |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>interpret and construct ideas (including feelings and life stories) with ease</i></li> <li>• <i>organise thoughts better</i></li> </ul>                             | <p>Efficient organization of ideas</p>        | <p>The RRSI framework sharpens literary interpretive skills through holistic and evidence-based organization of ideas.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>micro-to-macro analysis</i></li> <li>• <i>deeper, more focused analysis</i></li> <li>• <i>presence of textual support</i></li> <li>• <i>multifaceted</i></li> </ul> | <p>Holistic and evidence-based evaluation</p> |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>improves self-expression</i></li> <li>• <i>more self-reflective</i></li> </ul>  | <p>Self-reflective growth</p>                 | <p>The RRSI framework promotes self-reflective growth while immersing the reader in a visceral connection.</p>             |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The reader, as part of the story,</i></li> <li>• <i>intensified visceral reality</i></li> </ul>   | <p>Visceral connection</p>                    |  |

TABLE C. Thematic analysis of students' reflections on communal interpretation

| Code/Keywords/<br>Key phrases  | Categories                        | Theme   |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>appreciate the thoughts of others</i></li> <li>• <i>validate answers, educate others</i></li> <li>• <i>see other perspectives</i></li> <li>• <i>exposes multiple perspectives and emotions</i></li> <li>• <i>very critical learning exercises</i></li> </ul> | <p>Enhanced cognitive empathy</p> | <p>Communal interpretation strengthens cognitive empathy and drives collective problem-solving.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>create shared solutions</i></li> <li>• <i>shared accomplishment</i></li> <li>• <i>produce a stronger position</i></li> <li>• <i>values consensus</i></li> </ul>  | <p>Collective problem-solving</p> |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>improve relationship and communication with others</i></li> <li>• <i>develop character</i></li> <li>• <i>strengthen our connection</i></li> <li>• <i>establish unity among peers</i></li> </ul>  | <p>Character development</p>      | <p>Communal interpretation builds character and refines self-regulation.</p>                        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>develop the skills of justifying</i></li> <li>• <i>develop metacognition</i></li> <li>• <i>enhance open-mindedness</i></li> <li>• <i>improve sense of acceptance</i></li> </ul>  | <p>Refined self-regulation</p>    |   |