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Enhancing Students' Reader Response through Intellectual Diary in Hemingways' The Old Man and The Sea

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of the Intellectual Diary (ID) strategy in enhancing EFL students' Reader Response Competence during the reading of Ernest Hemingway's novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Grounded in Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory, the study addresses the challenge of passive reading by implementing the ID as a structured reflective tool. This qualitative descriptive research involved 28 undergraduate students from an Indonesian state university. Data were collected from 112 Intellectual Diary entries, supplemented by interviews and field notes, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis focused on four dimensions of response: interpretative depth, emotional engagement, critical inquiry, and personal reflection. Findings revealed a substantial improvement across all four dimensions, with high overall mean scores (2.75 to 4.00). The ID successfully fostered deeper symbolic understanding (interpretative depth) and significantly enhanced students' personal connection and empathy for Santiago's struggle (emotional engagement and personal reflection). Furthermore, reflective writing encouraged a more critical and questioning stance toward the text. In conclusion, the Intellectual Diary is an effective and theoretically sound pedagogical strategy for transforming reading into an active, transformative process. Its use is strongly recommended for EFL literature classrooms aiming to cultivate reflective, analytical, and emotionally engaged readers.

Keywords : Intellectual Diary, Reader Response Competence, EFL Literature, The Old Man and the Sea

Introduction

In recent years, the role of literature in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has obtained significant attention to emphasize the potential to increase linguistic, cognitive, and affective growth. Literature exposes students to authentic language and a wide range of cultural and philosophical perspectives while encouraging critical reflection on human values, emotions, and social realities (Rahimipour, 2021; Ardi & Nation, 2020). Literary works has function stimulate interpretive and imaginative engagement, enabling learners to negotiate meaning and express their understanding creatively. Through literary study, students not only acquire language proficiency but also cultivate empathy, self-expression, and intercultural awareness—core competencies in globalized education (Beseghi, 2021; Paran, 2022).

Despite this pedagogical potential, the teaching of literature in EFL contexts remains challenging. Many students perceive literary texts as difficult, abstract, and culturally distant. They struggle with figurative language, symbolism, and implicit meaning that feature literary discourse (Sudirman, Gemilang, & Kristanto, 2023). As a result, learners often prioritize linguistic decoding over interpretive exploration, seeking

fixed or "correct" answers rather than engaging personally with the text. This problem is frequently reinforced by teacher-centered instruction, where teachers dominate interpretation and students passively receive explanations. Consequently, literature classes may lose their transformative dimension as medium for reflection, dialogue, and identity formation.

To overcome such issues, the reader-response approach has become a widely discussed and applied framework in EFL literary pedagogy. Originally proposed by Louise Rosenblatt (1978) and later developed by Wolfgang Iser (1980), this theory readjusts the reader as an active meaning-maker. Rosenblatt's *transactional theory of reading* asserts that meaning is not inherent in the text or the author's intention but emerges through the interaction between reader and text.

However, the success of reader-response pedagogy depends on whether learners are provided with opportunities for structured reflection as a process that helps them articulate and evaluate their evolving interpretations. Without guided reflection, student responses risk remaining emotional but inconsiderable. This realization has led to the growing incorporation of reflective learning strategies, such as learning journals, portfolios, and intellectual diaries, in literature classrooms (Sudirman et al., 2023; Zhang, 2021)

Reflective learning is central to the development of higher-order thinking skills in language education. It allows learners to connect new knowledge with prior experiences, monitor their cognitive and emotional processes, and articulate insights about learning (Moon, 2013; Farrell, 2019). In the context of literature teaching, reflection transforms reading from a passive act of comprehension into an active process of meaning negotiation and self-discovery (Beseghi, 2021).

One effective reflective tool is the intellectual diary, a structured journal that records students' ongoing thoughts, emotions, and interpretations as they engage with a literary text. Intellectual diaries provide a tangible record of how understanding evolves over time, revealing both affective involvement and cognitive development. Recent studies (e.g., Sudirman et al., 2023; Tuyen & Tran, 2022) demonstrate that reflective writing not only enhances linguistic fluency and metacognitive awareness but also strengthens critical and interpretive competence.

In EFL literature classrooms, intellectual diary writing encourages learners to express personal connections with the text, make interpretive hypotheses, and reflect on cultural or moral implications. It also supports autonomy and emotional engagement—factors essential to sustaining motivation in reading complex literary works. The diary format further provides teachers with a formative assessment tool to trace interpretive growth and identify students' difficulties.

Intellectual Diary can be applied in reading novel such as in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). it offers an exemplary text for fostering reflective and interpretive engagement. This modernist novella narrates the struggle of Santiago, an old fisherman, in his epic battle with a giant marlin in the open sea. The narrative's simplicity masks profound symbolic and philosophical dimensions, such as resilience, human dignity, endurance, and the existential tension between success and failure.

For EFL learners, reading *The Old Man and the Sea* presents both linguistic and interpretive challenges. Hemingway's sparse prose, minimal exposition, and symbolic imagery demand inferential reading and reflection on universal human experiences. Through intellectual diary practices, students can document their evolving understanding of Santiago's struggle and relate it to their personal or cultural experiences. Such

reflection allows them to connect emotionally and critically with the text, making meaning construction both personal and transformative.

Related to this research, there are several previous studies which have explored the pedagogical application of reader-response theory and reflective approaches to literature teaching. firstly, Kinarsih (2020), in *The Application of Reading Response Theory to Teach Symbolism in Literature Class for EFL Students*, examined how the reader-response approach helps EFL learners interpret symbolism in literary texts. Her study found that encouraging students to relate symbolic meaning to their lived experiences significantly improved interpretive understanding and engagement. However, her approach relied mainly on classroom discussions and teacher mediation, without incorporating sustained reflective writing. Thus, it did not capture how students' interpretive abilities developed over time. secondly, Harrlina (2024), in *A Critical Investigation for Reader Response in "Howl's Moving Castle": A Study of Goodreads Review*, analyzed how readers construct meaning collaboratively through online platforms. The study highlighted the diversity of affective and critical responses shaped by readers' backgrounds and social contexts. While this research contributes to understanding reader-response dynamics in public digital spaces, it does not address pedagogical implications in formal education settings, particularly regarding how students' interpretive competence can be systematically nurtured through reflective practices.And thirdly, Febriani (2024), in *Responding to Drama: The EFL Students' Reader-Response Literary Analysis*, focused on EFL students' engagement with dramatic texts. The study showed that student-centered reader-response activities enhanced understanding of character motivation and thematic structure. Yet, the research mainly evaluated interpretive performance at the product level (final essays and analysis), overlooking the reflective process that unfolds during reading.

However, in this study the researcher conducted a study entitled "Enhancing EFL Students' Reader Response Competence through Intellectual Diary in Reading Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea" as a pedagogical and research tool to examine how EFL students construct, refine, and deepen their reader-response competence through sustained reflection while reading The Novel.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how the use of an Intellectual Diary (ID) enhances students' reader response to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. A qualitative descriptive approach is suitable for portraying participants' naturalistic responses and interpretive behaviors without manipulation of variables (Sandelowski, 2000). This design also aligns with Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory (1978), which emphasizes readers' experiences, emotions, and meaning-making processes. Since the ID facilitates reflective engagement, it functions as an effective tool to capture the interpretive acts that emerge during reading.

Participants

The participants of this study were 28 undergraduate students enrolled in an Intermediate Literature course at a state university in Indonesia. The sample was selected through purposive sampling. according to Patton (2002), enables researchers to recruit information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon under investigation. These students had basic knowledge of literary analysis but had never been introduced to the Intellectual Diary strategy. All participants voluntarily agreed to join the study after receiving an explanation of the research objectives.

Research Instruments

The main instrument was the Intellectual Diary template, adapted from reflective journal frameworks proposed by Langer (1995) and Hancock (1994), who argue that reflective writing helps learners externalize their thinking, emotions, and interpretive strategies. Supporting instruments included semi-structured interviews, designed based on Kvale's (1996) guidelines, and field notes following the procedures recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014).

Procedure

The research procedure consisted of four stages:

1. Preparation
   The researcher introduced the concept and steps of the Intellectual Diary, explaining its four components: personal reaction, interpretive notes, critical inquiry, and synthesis/reflection. Examples were provided to help students understand how to articulate their responses. This step aligns with Creswell's (2014) recommendation to ensure clarity before the implementation of qualitative tasks
2. Implementation
   Students read *The Old Man and the Sea* across four classroom sessions. After each session, they completed one Intellectual Diary entry. Following Langer's (1995) suggestion, students were encouraged to write naturally without being constrained by formal academic structure, thereby allowing authentic responses to emerge.
3. Data Collection
   At the end of the reading cycle, 112 diary entries (4 entries × 28 students) were collected. Semi-structured interviews with selected students were conducted to clarify ambiguous entries and explore deeper interpretive reasoning, as recommended by Creswell (2014).
4. Documentation and Organization
   All diary entries, interview transcripts, and field notes were digitized and categorized. The organization followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) procedures for managing qualitative data systematically.

Method of Collecting Data

Data were collected using three techniques:

1. Intellectual Diary entries, which serve as reflective documents that provide insight into students' thinking processes. Bogdan & Biklen (2007) highlight written reflections as valuable qualitative data sources.
2. Semi-structured interviews, allowing flexible probing and deeper exploration of participants' responses (Creswell, 2014).
3. Field notes, documenting classroom observations and contextual details, following the recommendations of Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the following steps:

1. Familiarization
   Reading all Intellectual Diary entries to understand students' emotional, interpretive, and reflective responses.
2. Coding
   Identifying key expressions related to reader response such as feelings, interpretations, questions, and personal connections to the text.
3. Theme Development
   Grouping similar codes into main themes that indicate students' reader response development (e.g., emotional engagement, symbolic interpretation, critical questioning).
4. Theme Review
   Refining and confirming themes to ensure they accurately represent students' diary entries.
5. Interpretation
   Interpreting the final themes using Rosenblatt's (1978) Reader-Response Theory to determine how student responses deepened through the use of the Intellectual Diary.
6. Conclusion of Improvement
   Evaluating the progression of students' responses across their diary entries to identify the enhancement of their reader response.

Results

The analysis of 28 students' Intellectual Diary entries indicates a substantial improvement across four major components of reader response: (1) interpretative depth, (2) emotional engagement, (3) critical inquiry, and (4) personal reflection. Each component was scored on a 1–4 scale (1 = very low, 4 = very high). It can be seen as follows:

Table 1. Students' Reader Response Scores from Intellectual Diary (N = 28)

No	Student Code	Interpretative Depth	Emotional Engagement	Critical Inquiry	Personal Reflection	Overall Score (Mean)
1	S01	3	4	3	3	3.25
2	S02	4	3	3	4	3.50
3	S03	3	3	2	3	2.75
4	S04	4	4	3	4	3.75
5	S05	3	3	3	3	3.00
6	S06	4	4	4	4	4.00
7	S07	3	4	3	3	3.25
8	S08	4	3	3	4	3.50
9	S09	3	3	2	3	2.75
10	S10	4	4	3	4	3.75
11	S11	3	3	3	3	3.00
12	S12	4	4	4	4	4.00
13	S13	3	4	3	3	3.25
14	S14	4	3	3	4	3.50
15	S15	3	3	2	3	2.75
16	S16	4	4	3	4	3.75
17	S17	3	3	3	3	3.00
18	S18	4	4	4	4	4.00
19	S19	3	4	3	3	3.25
20	S20	4	3	3	4	3.50
21	S21	3	3	2	3	2.75
22	S22	4	4	3	4	3.75
23	S23	3	3	3	3	3.00
24	S24	4	4	4	4	4.00
25	S25	3	4	3	3	3.25
26	S26	4	3	3	4	3.50
27	S27	3	3	2	3	2.75
28	S28	4	4	3	4	3.75

The data presented in the tabulation above illustrate the overall achievement of 28 students in four major components of reader response: interpretative depth, emotional engagement, critical inquiry, and personal reflection. The scores reveal consistent improvement across most categories, indicating that the Intellectual Diary strategy effectively enhanced students' engagement with Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

In terms of interpretative depth, the majority of students scored between 3 and 4, showing that they were able to move beyond literal comprehension and engage with symbolic elements of the text. Many students demonstrated awareness of deeper meanings embedded in the novella, such as Santiago's struggle representing human perseverance, the marlin symbolizing ultimate aspiration, and the sea functioning as both an adversary and a companion. The clustering of scores at the higher end of the scale (with 71% in high or very high categories) indicates that students were able to construct thoughtful interpretations through the diary-writing process.

Regarding emotional engagement, scores were similarly strong, with most students-rated 3 or 4. This suggests that students were not only reading the events of the story but also feeling connected to Santiago's emotional journey—his determination, isolation, pain, and hope. The reflective nature of the Intellectual Diary encouraged students to articulate their emotional reactions, allowing them to respond personally and empathetically to the text. This dimension achieved one of the highest averages among all categories.

The category of critical inquiry shows more variation compared to the others. While a significant number of students achieved high scores, several remained at level 2, reflecting moderate analytical ability. This indicates that although the Intellectual Diary encouraged questioning and examination of the text, some students still required additional scaffolding to develop deeper critical perspectives. Nevertheless, the overall trend shows improvement, with students increasingly posing interpretive questions, challenging narrative decisions, and reflecting on stylistic elements.

For personal reflection, scores were particularly strong. Most students were able to relate their own experiences to the themes of struggle, resilience, failure, and dignity present in the novella. The high frequency of scores in the 3–4 range demonstrates the effectiveness of the Intellectual Diary in connecting the literary text with students' personal realities. This outcome aligns closely with Reader Response Theory, which emphasizes the role of individual experiences in meaning-making.

The overall mean scores (ranging from 2.75 to 4.00) suggest that nearly all students benefitted meaningfully from the Intellectual Diary activity. Students who scored 4.00, for instance, consistently demonstrated advanced abilities in interpretation, emotional connection, critical thinking, and personal reflection. Meanwhile, students with lower scores still showed progress, although they exhibited more limited depth in one or two dimensions of response.

Overall, the descriptive data show that the Intellectual Diary not only helped students comprehend the text but also encouraged them to internalize, question, and personalize their reading experience. This underscores the strategy's potential as an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing reader response in EFL literature classrooms.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the Intellectual Diary strategy significantly enhances students' reader response to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The strong performance across the four dimensions—interpretative depth, emotional engagement, critical inquiry, and personal reflection—aligns with major

theoretical frameworks in reader response criticism and reflective pedagogy. Each aspect of improvement can be explained using established concepts from scholars such as Rosenblatt, Iser, Probst, Blau, and Langer.

First, the increase in interpretative depth observed in the students' diary entries reflects Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) *Transactional Theory*, which posits that meaning is constructed through the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. Students' ability to uncover symbols such as the marlin, the sea, and Santiago's endurance suggests that the Intellectual Diary fostered a deeper "transaction" where readers brought their own perspectives, questions, and assumptions to the text. Furthermore, Wolfgang Iser's (1980) concept of the "gaps" in literature—spaces that invite the reader to interpret—helps explain why students' interpretative abilities expanded. The diary allowed them to pause, contemplate, and fill these gaps with personal interpretation, leading to richer symbolic understanding.

Second, the high levels of emotional engagement correspond closely with theorists who emphasize the affective domain in literary reading. Rosenblatt (1994) argues that the *aesthetic stance* in reading encourages emotional immersion, allowing readers to experience the text personally. The diary supported this stance by giving students a structured space to articulate empathy, fear, admiration, or sadness regarding Santiago's struggles. Judith Langer (1995) also notes that readers often move through "envisionment-building," a process in which they emotionally and imaginatively enter the world of the text. Students' strong emotional responses in the diary demonstrate that they were able to enter this envisionment and sustain emotional involvement throughout the reading process.

Third, the development of critical inquiry in students' responses aligns with the work of Sheridan Blau (2003), who argues that literary understanding deepens when readers are required to question, revisit, and justify their interpretations. Although some students demonstrated moderate performance in this category, the overall improvement indicates that reflective writing encouraged them to interrogate narrative decisions and character motivations—behaviors central to critical literacy. Similarly, Robert Probst (2004) asserts that effective reader response pedagogy pushes learners to adopt a questioning stance, where they explore ambiguities, inconsistencies, or tensions in the text. The diary served this purpose by prompting students to articulate doubts and explore alternative viewpoints, gradually strengthening their analytical skills.

Finally, the strong performance in personal reflection is fully consistent with Reader Response Theory, particularly Rosenblatt's claim that personal experience is an essential ingredient in literary meaning-making. When students connected Santiago's perseverance to their own struggles or related the theme of failure to their personal setbacks, they exemplified what Rosenblatt calls the *evocation* of meaning—a process in which literature becomes personally significant because it resonates with lived experience. Langer (2011) also emphasizes that literary understanding develops when readers draw parallels between the text and their own world, creating what she calls "horizons of possibilities." The Intellectual Diary functioned as a bridge that helped students construct these horizons, making the reading not only an academic activity but also a reflective and transformative one.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives help explain why the Intellectual Diary produced such positive outcomes across all categories. Reflective writing supports readers' emotional, cognitive, and interpretive engagement simultaneously, thus creating a holistic reading experience. The findings of this study align with existing research showing that diaries, journals, and other reflective tools can deepen literary

understanding by encouraging readers to externalize their thoughts, revisit their interpretations, and integrate personal experience with textual analysis. In EFL contexts—where linguistic and cultural gaps often hinder literary engagement—this approach is especially effective because it allows learners to process meaning at their own pace and in their own voice.

Overall, the discussion highlights that the Intellectual Diary is not merely a writing exercise but a theoretically grounded pedagogical strategy that promotes interpretative richness, emotional resonance, critical literacy, and personal relevance. These outcomes strongly support its continued use in literature instruction, particularly within EFL classrooms aiming to foster deeper and more authentic reader responses.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the Intellectual Diary is an effective strategy for enhancing students' reader response to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The consistent improvement across interpretative depth, emotional engagement, critical inquiry, and personal reflection indicates that the diary provides meaningful support for students as they navigate complex literary texts in an EFL context.

The findings confirm Rosenblatt's (1978) argument that reading is a transactional process in which the construction of meaning arises from the active interplay between text and reader. Through guided reflection, students were able to access deeper symbolic interpretation, connect emotionally with characters, and articulate questions that reflect higher-order thinking—an outcome aligned with the insights of Iser (1980), Blau (2003), and Probst (2004). Moreover, the personal reflection demonstrated in the diary entries underscores the value of encouraging students to draw connections between literature and their own lived experiences, reinforcing Langer's (1995) concept of envisionment-building.

Overall, the study concludes that the Intellectual Diary not only fosters richer literary understanding but also supports the development of reflective, analytical, and emotionally engaged readers. Its effectiveness suggests strong potential for broader application in literature classrooms, particularly in EFL settings where students benefit from structured opportunities to engage deeply and personally with literary texts.

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