

## **Formalist (Linguistic) criticism in an English language teacher education program: The reward approach**

Arda Arikan, Hacettepe University, Turkey

The place of literary criticism in the education of pre-service English language teachers in EFL contexts is rarely discussed in the related literature. Traditional view of teaching criticism involves learning of the tenets of the critical school and applying them to literary texts. In this paper, an application of teaching criticism is discussed with examples from classroom tasks and procedures. Constructed by the researcher, the 'Reward' approach stands for reading, elicitation, writing, articulating, representational study, and discussion. In 'Reward', a multidisciplinary approach to reading of a literary text was used by incorporating the study of various visual arts. In this paper, the approach is applied and the evaluation is completed through surveys and qualitative data of students' (n=80) experiences to see how learning formalist criticism affected their literary reading processes, perception, and thinking. The results of this study suggest that the overall appreciation of the students with this approach is high and the students want to learn about literature courses through similar approaches in their future literature courses.

**Keywords:** formalism; formalist criticism; literature; literary reading; making strange; pre-service teachers; defamiliarization; artwork

### **1. Introduction**

Research (Phelan, 2001; Sadoff & Cain, 1994; Showalter, 2003) has pointed at the problematic nature of undergraduate literary criticism courses and provided solutions or expressed opinions on how to improve teaching at these specific locales. Similarly, Showalter (2003: 11, 12) claims that teaching becomes another subject of our research and publication in a way to reflect upon the relationship between what we teach and how we teach it in new ways. Hence, although problems with teaching undergraduate literary criticism continues, contemporary classroom based research aims to improve the quality of teaching literary criticism. In the past, many professors met teaching theory with ambivalence and even terror, although such negative feelings subsided as literature teachers began to reconceive the theory course as a set of problems rather than a list of "isms" (Showalter, 2003: 107). At present, teaching literature in college level classrooms embodies the study of

literary criticism both as knowledge of historical evolution of the literary thought and as for practical purposes through which the students will attain a more in-depth understanding of literary texts. Balancing these two ends; the theoretical and the practical use of the theory courses is the work of the literature instructors who shape the future of the teaching theory with their research.

## 2. Background

Among a number of schools of criticism, Formalist criticism is an important trend of thought from a historical perspective although its effect on students' perception and on their analytical skills awaits further analysis. In this research, how learning about formalist criticism affected students' perceptions of literary reading is studied. One purpose of choosing formalism was that its focus was on the 'language' of a literary text. For the formalists, the procedural method of the new literary science of formalism consisted largely of adopting a negative or contrastive approach to the distinctiveness of literature and that literature quite simply was everything that history, philosophy, ethnology, psychology, and so on, were not (Jefferson, 1990, 129). Modern approaches to literature focus on transmitting the skills to develop an understanding, appreciation, and reflection of literary writing. Formalist criticism, because it relies on technical construction of a text rather than on its effect on the reader or on society, or on its existence as a sociopolitical entity, may seem to be an outdated and traditional trend of thought. However, my experience as an instructor of literature in English has shown to me that especially foreign language learners who are taking criticism courses benefit from this particular criticism because it is the main school of criticism which particularly problematizes the importance of how language is used in a text. In as much as foreign language learners take courses on linguistics and grammar, formalist criticism synthesizes students' relationship with linguistic and grammatologic elements of the use of language in literature.

The main technical concept of formalist criticism, *defamiliarization*, transforms the way we look at, see, feel, and verbalize the things within our reach. It created new ways of writing about the things we often perceive, or talk about in the clichés of the language we speak. Foreign language learners need to be creative while communicating in a foreign language in order to understand such sociopragmatic and sociocultural utterances such as sarcasm, tone, mode, and humour which require an element of linguistic analysis for the counterparts in the communication. All these show the importance of and the rationale behind what formalist criticism may offer to us while teaching literary criticism to foreign language learners.

Smolova (2004) argues that Formalism (New Criticism) is mainly concerned with '*what* the text says and *how* it says it,' and summarizes its fundamental tenets as follows:

- Literary texts are finished 'knowable' products;
- Interpretations are based solely on the properties inherent in texts;
- Everything necessary for understanding of a text is already in the text;
- The emphasis is on close, rigorous, and analytical reading;
- Classical values and norms are to be maintained in literature;
- The text is approached empirically (the type of meter, number of lines in the stanzas, sound effects, syntax, tropes, imagery, etc.);
- The parts of a text are analyzed for their contribution to the overall meaning.

Foreign language learners do not only learn grammatical structures, but also their language learning experience demands their delving into multiple systems in a language that produce and transmit a vast array of meanings situated in different contexts. Hence, language learning and language teaching at a university level should examine language as a system and probe into its deep structures including the lexicology since all words have a particular function (Manzi, 1994: 14) in the societal use of the language composed by them. Such an approach is especially important for foreign language learners whose interaction with literature in the target language is rather problematic especially because the function of literature in foreign language teaching has always carried an ambiguous position. Such an ambiguity can be seen in the discussions surrounding why to study literature. Should literature be taught only because it exemplifies the best examples of the language in which it is written or for some other cognitive, social, or ideological reasons?

Formalism has a close relationship with linguistics (Eagleton, 1996). Linguistics is a field that is studied in many courses by these students who will be English language teachers in the future. Hence, in this research design, literary texts, the school of criticism and linguistic analysis has presented a reunification of literature, arts and science through activities which aimed to bring these fields together in order to see how such an experiment resulted in reading of literature.

### **2.1. Research Questions**

This applied research tried to answer the following questions:

1. What was the model's perceived effect on the learning of the subject matter?
2. Did the students enjoy the model activities and the whole learning experience?

3. Did the activities increase classroom interaction, participation, and students' interests in literary criticism?
4. Did students perceive that this model was a valid learning opportunity compared to their previous literature learning experiences?

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The participants were 80 second year English language teaching students studying at the teacher education program of Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education.

#### **3.2. Instruments**

The questionnaire prepared by the researcher aimed to present a descriptive view of the students' opinions of the activities instructed. It consisted of 20 Likert type questions which asked students to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were not sure, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements given. The statements tried to elicit students' opinions that are considered to answer the aims of the research question. Furthermore, students' written responses to how this model affected their perception were collected and analysed through qualitative methods.

#### **3.3. Procedures**

In this research study, I will focus on the present state of my teaching of literary criticism while teaching at an English Language Teaching (ELT) pre-service teacher education literature course through a model I developed and called REWARD (see Table 1 for the related activities). Reward is the abbreviation standing for the steps of teaching through the processes of:

- Reading, (R)
- Eliciting opinions on the style, (E)
- Writing, (W)
- Analysis through Formalist criticism, (A)
- Representation, and (R)
- Discussion. (D)

Reward follows an inductive approach to the teaching of criticism since the activities designed and questions asked lead to the understanding of how formalist criticism can be applied to our literary and artistic reading. In this experimental teaching design, students' focus was on applying formalist criticism to literary texts and artwork rather than learning historical or biographical knowledge surrounding formalist criticism. Furthermore, it is

aimed that students apply what they learn about formalism to other forms of visual arts in an experimental and interdisciplinary manner.

Materials used in the teaching of formalist criticism are extracts from canonical and classical texts in which an object or an action is described through defamiliariation, artwork such as paintings and sculptures in which an artist has defamiliarized an ordinary object in an artistic way, and lecture notes in form of a power point presentation through which how formalist criticism can be applied to our literary reading and analysis is described (see Figure 1 for the material for teaching through Reward).

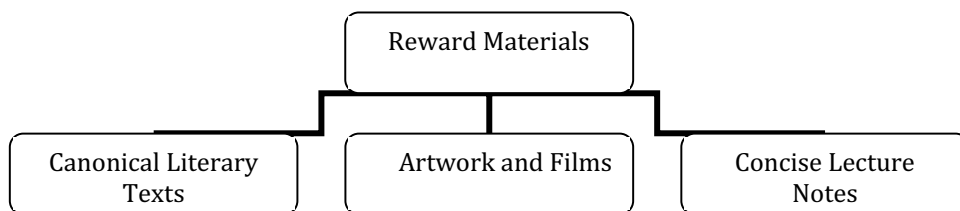


Figure 1. Materials for Teaching through Reward.

Table 1 shows the main classroom activities with which the students were engaged and their aims to achieve the goals of Reward.

Table 1.

*Activities and Aims in Reward*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Aim</b>
<b>Reading</b>	Looking at how classical writers described an object or an action
<b>Eliciting</b>	Eliciting students' opinions on how and why the writers might have written this way, discussing how alternative wording would change the meaning constructed
<b>Writing</b>	Producing similar texts by manipulating differing meanings in a conscious and purposeful manner
<b>Articulating Formalist Criticism</b>	Lecturing to clarify some helpful concepts and terms related to Formalist criticism such as ordinary language and literary language, story and plot, and 'making strange' or defamiliarization
<b>Representational Work</b>	Applying the concepts and terms learned to artwork and films
<b>Discussion</b>	Exchanging opinions on the value of Formalist criticism in our reading and seeing, excavating how this learning process affected our perception, knowledge, and analysis of literary texts and the world around us

## **4. The Teaching Process**

### **4.1. Reading classical texts**

Students read the beginning of *Anna Karenina*. The following questions guided us in our reading of this classical text:

- What is described or narrated in this text?
- Which particular figures of speech (metaphors or similes) are used while describing object or actions?
- In which sentences narration is slowed down, that is to say, an action which takes place in a second is narrated as if it were a time-taking action? What kind of effect does this narration technique produce?

The opening passage of *Anna Karenina* was used to answer the questions given above (see Appendix I for the text). Through guiding students with many questions about the text, I tried to make my students realize that every single word in this text means something in relation to the overall message or messages we can extract from it. Having read these paragraphs and being guided by purposeful question, students came to realize the significance of Stepan Arkadyevich's slippers. They discussed the reasons why the author described the slippers in such a detailed manner. Soon, they agreed that the significance of the slippers had something to do with his wife, and the significance of this ordinary household object gained another dimension. As these examples show, students look deep into the meaning of some particular words and their relations with other words surrounding them. Through such an activity, as students reported, they became 'aware of the importance of the words often overlooked in their previous readings'. As one student suggested, 'Slippers... a pair of very simple household object that had no significance whatsoever until we completed this activity. Slippers... comfort to your feet, but a huge exercise to your mind as is the case in this activity.' Another student commented that the slippers were 'a pair of unimportant objects for the feet until we focused on formalism.' Another student, on the other hand, proposed that the author 'put these slippers into this text to make us feel that his wife cared about him since she didn't want him to walk on cold feet which could disturb his health.' In short, such readings and questioning with a focus on the text guided these students to read the linguistic construction of the text to infer meaning to a greater extent.

### **4.2. Eliciting opinions on how and why the writers must have written this way:**

Students discussed the the style the author wrote through while describing objects or situations. Then, by focusing on the setting, characters, and plot structure, students exchanged their opinions on the construction of the text.

Stylistic qualities of these texts served as starting points to our discussions to prepare our students to come to see how the concept of defamiliarization works in various literary texts. An activity (Carter and Long, 1991: 101) called "scale (or cline) of literariness" is used as a follow up activity to elicit students' opinions on how literary some sample passages are in literature although such a question is open to discussion and further study and rating of the items as low to high degrees of literariness. The main aim of this activity was to measure, in a subjective way, a text's level of literariness. In a series of attempts, students tried to decide which short texts were written in ordinary language and which were in the literary by using a sample scale like given in Figure 2. For instance, while the students rated Wilde's (1994) "The artist is the creator of beautiful things" received a low rating, the sentence following that "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" was found highly literary by the students.

**ordinary ----- literary**

*Figure 2. Scale of Literariness.*

#### 4.3. Writing similar texts

Before learning about how "making strange" worked in constructing a text, students are distributed a collection of pictures portraying some dramatic scenes and they are asked to describe these frozen moments in their own words. Completing their close textual analysis with the help of which they became familiar with defamiliarization, they were asked to use this technique to narrate these moments. Students come to see how defamiliarization works and how an artist unpacks the hidden moment with his artistic and technical skills. One student's description of a scene can be given as an example to show how students' change in perception affected their seeing and expressing a dramatic scene. Prior to studying defamiliarization, one student described one event as follows:

Seeing that she had hung herself on a tree, he cried in pain.

Having been given a chance to describe the same event in a more artistic and literal way, the same student described the same situation as follows:

When he saw his life's meaning was flying to God with her unique beauty he felt that somebody or something even she herself cut the cottonthread of his life. He could not carry this pain on his shoulders and he knelt down in despair. He raised his arms to the sky once he had used them to embrace his life's meaning, and samely he raised his arms to the sky to reach his life. But when he felt his inability to reach his life's meaning, he realized his pain in his bones, and all his struggles which were in vain. Then he was drowned under his rain of tears and tried to get rid of this mortal rain. As

each minute passed, he understood that his death was approaching slowly. He did not want to struggle with it, even he was angry with it because of its coming late. He felt the blood coming from his heart and going out from his eyes and from his life...

#### 4.4. Articulating Formalist criticism

In the Articulating Formalist Criticism stage, a lecture as Power Point Presentation introduced the students with the following aspects of formalist criticism so that they can find answers to their questions in the previous stages and apply these systematic procedures to the following tasks. In a nutshell, the students are taught the following items:

- Formalism as a school of criticism may be defined as a way of understanding art or literature primarily through its techniques rather than as a mere vehicle for personal expression or for moral and political doctrines (Drabble, 2000: 374). In such a technical reading, the text is seen as a linguistic construction whose artistic value can be seen in how *defamiliarization* works in changing ordinary language and reality into literary language and reality (see Figure 2).

Ordinary language	→	Literary language
Outside reality	→	Artistic Reality
Story	→	Plot

Figure 3. Functions of defamiliarization.

- Formalism has been known for its over reliance on form over content in a literary work. One of the most important aspects of formalism is its vigorous study of literary techniques such as the technique called “making strange” or *defamiliarization*. As Webster (1990) states Shklovsky introduced the term which, for him, was the essence of all art. As he proposed, defamiliarization can be rationalized as follows:

in most activities perception becomes a habitual, automatic process where we are often unaware of, or take for granted our view of things and the relations between them. Poetic language could disturb this ‘habitualization’ and make us see things differently and anew. This is done by the ability of poetic or literary language to ‘make strange’ or *defamiliarize* the familiar world, what changed in fact was not the world or object in question but the way of perceiving it: the mode of perception. (p. 37).

- Any approach to a literary text through formalist criticism should take the text as a linguistic, artistic, and scientific construct which is not a direct product of social forces and not a mirror through which we can see the qualities of a society.



#### **4.5. Representational work on artwork and films**

Literature and arts have often been considered in relation to each other and as complementary activities whose contents and forms have often been studied in relation to each other. Because the focus of formalist criticism was on the technical construction of a text which makes a work artistic, students experimented with how defamiliarization could be used in visual arts. Students focused on visual art work created by various painters to see how defamiliarization worked in the realm of painting. In this process, first, students identified the subject matter of the painting and then discussed how that subject matter was defamiliarized by that particular painter. Knowing that formalist criticism insisted on making the ordinary artistic, students came to see how such ordinary subjects such as angels, trees, or body parts were defamiliarized by discussing their perceptions of these subject matters. One significant example was Picasso's painting in which a modern angel was depicted with flowers and as a pale skinned regular man and students overwhelmingly addressed how this painting depicted this modern angel unlike the classical and traditional representations of angels as divine creatures. The following questions guided us in our study of visual materials:

- What is shown in this painting? An object? An event? An action?
- How does the theme shown differ from its original real life world form?
- How did the artist defamiliarize the theme or object?
- What are some particular traces of defamiliarization?

#### **4.6. Discussion on how Formalist criticism affected our perception, knowledge, and analysis of literary texts**

Students were fascinated with the process of learning about a school of criticism because of the fact that they could apply what they learned about formalism into their own literary readings. Being of practical use, formalist criticism helped them see the literariness of a literary text. That is to say, as one student responded, by learning about formalist criticism, they came to see 'why classics were difficult to read.' It was a fascinating experience for them to see how literary writing could purposefully be different as a mode of writing. This awareness of students is largely due to reading and discussing about defamiliarization, a term that really helped students in their own reading of literature. Here are a categorized samples of students' responses to the question how learning about formalist criticism affected them:

### **5. Results**

#### **5.1. Questionnaires**

Data are reported in numbers and percentages of student responses to each statement.

### **5.1.1. Classroom Environment**

Items 1, 3, 4, and 15 asked students to evaluate the overall learning atmosphere. The results suggest that 79% of the students believed that they learned within this approach more effectively while finding it enjoyable (Items 1 and 15). Eighty percent of these students felt interested and motivated while working with these activities (Item 4).

### **5.1.2. Effect on learners' learning of literature**

Seventy-three percent of the students claimed that these activities caused a change in their perception (Item 11) and 72% of them claimed that they applied these activities in their own lives (Item 12). Eighty percent of them also realized that these activities caused them to be more sensitive to the language used in a literary text.

### **5.1.3. Opinions on the techniques**

Seventy-nine of the students argued that working on a scale to measure literariness was useful (Item 5). Similarly, guessing about the text pieces was found to be interesting 75% of them (Item 6). Seventy-three percent of them found producing texts was new to them (Item 7) and 78% claimed to have enjoyed working with the visual materials (Item 9). In contrast to these positive views, the short lecture on formalism was found to be enjoyable by only 54% of the students.

### **5.1.4. Comparison of traditional versus Reward approaches**

Seventy-nine percent of the students claimed that this new approach resulted in an increase in classroom interaction among the peers (Item 3). The past literature courses were found to be more interesting than this approach by only 1% of the students in contrast to 75% of them who disagreed with this statement (Item 2). Similarly, only 12% of these students found their previous literature courses to be more effective (Item 10). Finally, 79% of these students claimed that they want to learn about literature courses through such approaches in the future (Item 14), showing that the overall appreciation of the students with this approach was high.

## **5.2. Open-ended Responses**

Following vignettes show how students' understanding evolved in this approach.

### **5.2.1. Change in perception**

- It was a rainy day and I saw a tree with pink flowers on it. I used to think for a short time and move on. This time, having remembered our classroom discussion on formalist criticism, I insisted on thinking in a different way,

in a more sensitive manner. I tried to put the existence of this tree into words in an artistic manner in which I purposefully stayed away from our ordinary language.

### **5.2.2. Aesthetic appreciation:**

- I have been reading *Lily of the Valley* and before learning about formalism, I used to read and read wondering how the novel would end. I would get bored because the detailed descriptions in the book were going on and on. After learning about formalist criticism, I started to focus on the details of how particular objects were described because I had learned that in these details technical make up of literature was hidden. I started to enjoy reading these detailed descriptions by thinking of these.

### **5.2.3. Creativity:**

- I have been thinking about defamiliarization. I now realize that it can be described as 'the original usual' because what literary writing is the usual thing narrated in an original way.

### **5.2.4. Learning Process:**

- While reading a novel, I would read to see what would happen in the end. Now, I came to realize that how the language used in a novel matters more than the end of the novel. In the past, I would read a novel to reach to that conclusion so that I learn the ending. It was my major aim. As we discussed in the classroom, I came to understand that we can look at literature as art in technical terms. Our metaphor of literary writing as that of a technician's has really affected my understanding of what makes a novel.

## **6. Conclusion**

Reward is a task based approach to the teaching of literary criticism that can be applied to the teaching of any critical school. Reward can be applicable in those contexts where particular teaching applications are sought to improve the quality of the teaching of literary criticism in an active learning manner. The main foundation of the Reward activities is that they rely on teaching specific points which belong to a school of criticism in a practical way. Such an approach asks students to experience how learning about practical applications of criticisms change the way they perceive and understand literary texts. Because it is selective and eclectic in preparing what to teach about that particular school of criticism, it is the instructor's duty to plan the curricular items to teach by considering the needs of the learners and other contextual factors that shape the suprastructure surrounding the learning and teaching environment. Our experience with Reward has shown that such an approach eased students' understanding of criticism and has important

outcomes such as increasing students' motivation and creating a positive classroom atmosphere.

Teaching formalist criticism to pre-service foreign language teachers was a great experience firstly because the quality of classroom discussions was worth experiencing in terms of their density and depth. As our classroom learning and interaction continued, I came to see that formalist criticism helped to fight against students' misconceptions of many literary points. For instance, due to their previous high school literature education in which memorization of the facts and figures of literature was the main practice of teaching and learning, many students have shown traces of misconceptions especially about the place of the Canonical classics in literature. In our classroom discussions, some students had verbalized that classics were hard to understand because 'they were written in a different period of time in which the spoken language was complex and different from that of today's. Some others discussed that classics included many detailed and lengthy descriptions because 'authors preferred to be wordy in order to be realistic which was a requirement of the period in which the text was produced.' We know that misconceptions are difficult to fight. However, formalist criticism helped us to clear the mist surrounding the nature of good writing, including many of the classics, and how classics were written in technical terms.

Teaching formalist criticism helped me to reach many students who were not participating in our classroom discussions. As multiple intelligences theory puts forward, many analytical students need more analytical tools to study literature or they need to work on literature in a more technical way. Reading and responding to literature does not often work for all students especially those mathematical/analytical students whose success in verbal activities is often low. For these students, as I noticed, formalism allowed for studying texts in a more analytical way. Teaching formalist literary criticism helped me create awareness in students about the purpose of art as a process rather than as "reading a literary work to know what happens at the end of the story line" which is a traditional habit which has always been practiced by the students at this specific learning location.

### **The Author**

Arda Arikan received his PhD from Penn State University, College of Education, Language and Literacy Education, Bilingual and Multicultural Education option area. His research interests are educational anthropology and cultural studies, literature teaching, materials development, and teacher education.

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## APPENDIX A

Everything was in confusion in the Oblonsky's house. The wife had discovered that the husband was carrying on an intrigue with a French girl, who had been a governess in their family, and she had announced to her husband that she could not go on living in the same house with him. This position of affairs had now lasted two days, and not only the husband and wife themselves, but all the members of their family and the household, were painfully conscious of it. All the members of the family and the household felt that there was no sense in their living together, and that even stray people brought together by chance in any inn had more in common with one another than they, the members of the family and the household of the Oblonskys. The wife did not leave her own apartments; the husband had not been home for two days. The children ran wild all over the house; the English governess quarreled with the housekeeper, and wrote to a friend asking her to look out for a new employ for her; the man cook had walked off the day before just at dinnertime; the kitchenmaid and the coachman had given warning.

Two days after the quarrel, Prince Stepan Arkadyevich Oblonsky - Stiva, as he was called in the fashionable world - woke up at his usual hour, that is, at eight o'clock in the morning, not in his wife's bedroom, but on the leather-covered sofa in his study. He turned over his stout, well-cared-for person on the springy sofa, as though he would sink into a long sleep again; he

vigorously embraced the pillow on its other side and buried his face in it; but all at once he jumped up, sat up on the sofa, and opened his eyes.

'Yes, yes, how was it now?' he thought, going over his dream. 'Yes, how was it? Yes! Alabin was giving a dinner at Darmstadt; no, not Darmstadt, but something American. Yes, but then, Darmstadt was in America. Yes, Alabin was giving a dinner on glass tables, and the tables sang, *Il mio tesoro* - no, not *Il mio tesoro*, but something better, and there were some sort of little decanters on the table, and, at the same time, these decanters were women,' he recalled.

Stepan Arkadyevich's eyes twinkled gaily, and he pondered with a smile. 'Yes, it was jolly, very jolly. There was a great deal more that was delightful, only there's no putting it into words, or even expressing it in one's waking thoughts.' And noticing a gleam of light peeping in beside one of the woollen-cloth curtains, he cheerfully dropped his feet over the edge of the sofa and felt about with them for his slippers, a present on his last birthday, worked for him by his wife on gold-colored morocco. And, as he used to do for the last nine years, he stretched out his hand, without getting up, toward the place where his dressing gown always hung in the bedroom. And thereupon he suddenly remembered that he was not sleeping in his wife's room, but in his study, as well as the reason; the smile vanished from his face and he knit his brows<sup>1</sup>.

### APPENDIX B: The questionnaire

n= 80	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	1. I enjoyed learning about formalist criticism.	74	5	1	-
2. Our previous criticism classes were more interesting.	-	1	5	28	47
3. I interacted with my friends more in these class meetings.	71	8	1	-	-
4. I noticed that the class worked in a more interested and motivated manner with these activities.	79	1	-	-	-
5. Working on a scale to measure literariness was a useful activity.	77	2	-	1	-
6. Guessing why the text pieces were written by the writer taught me a lot.	43	32	1	3	1
7. Producing texts by manipulating differing meanings was new to me.	52	21	5	1	1
8. The short lecture on formalist criticism was enjoyable.	27	27	10	11	5
9. I enjoyed working with visual materials.	68	10	-	2	-
10. Our past literary criticism was more effective in my learning of criticism.	2	10	8	45	15
11. I feel like I started to see things differently in my personal life with what I have learned in this class meeting.	67	6	4	-	3
12. After our work on formalist criticism, I applied what he learned to my extra curricular life such as TV viewing and reading.	70	2	4	-	2
13. These activities sensitized me towards the language in use more than other activities we did in the past.	76	4	-	-	-
14. I want to be taught literary criticism with similar activities in the future.	77	2	-	1	-
15. Overall, I learned more effectively with these activities.	72	7	1	-	-

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bibliomania.com/0/0/52/95/frameset.html>