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# Pictorial/Oral and Written Responses of First Grade Students: Can Aesthetic Growth Be Measured?

Jennifer L. Altieri

Reader-response research (Galda, 1983; Many, 1992; Wiseman, Many, and Altieri, 1992) continues to provide insight into the complex responses of children. From this perspective, each reading event is viewed as a transaction between the reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Meaning is not inherent within the text or reader but rather created by the reader who uses the cues provided by the text.

Rosenblatt believes that readers can read aesthetically and efferently. When reading aesthetically the reader focuses on the lived-through experience of the story. On the other hand, efferent reading requires the reader to focus on information to be acquired. Aesthetic and efferent are terms that are now beginning to be applied to the responses students create (Many and Wiseman, 1991; Wiseman and Many, 1992). Yet this research on aesthetic quality is limited to written responses by students.

Although research supports allowing young children to respond through modalities other than writing (Ferreiro, 1986; Hickman, 1983; Kiefer, 1983; Lehr, 1988; Olson, 1992), research analyzing the aesthetic quality of such responses is

virtually nonexistent. The question remains whether children can demonstrate aesthetic involvement when responding with a pictorial/oral response.

This study sought to extend the existing research in several ways. An aesthetic instrument was applied to first-grade students' pictorial/oral and written responses to determine if significant aesthetic growth was demonstrated in responses collected over a three-month time period. Furthermore the study compared the students' written growth to the growth demonstrated in the pictorial/oral responses.

## Method

**The classroom.** The self-contained classroom used in this study contained 22 first-grade children. In this suburban school, the majority of students were caucasian and from a middle-class socioeconomic level. Six of the students were not present for all books and thus their responses were not analyzed.

The teacher used trade books to teach reading on a daily basis. Although she used a basal during her first year of teaching, she gradually began to incorporate literature. During her third year of teaching she eliminated the basal from her instruction. This was her seventh year to teach first grade.

**Texts.** Literature chosen for this study consisted of six age-appropriate picture books selected by the teacher. Books to which the students responded in a pictorial/oral modality included *Dr. Desoto* (Steig, 1982), *Imogene's Antlers* (Small, 1985), and *Greedy Pig* (Dawson, 1986). Written responses were completed in response to *Abiyoyo* (Seeger, 1986), *The Tub People* (Conrad, 1989), and *Willy the Wimp* (Browne, 1984).

**Collecting the responses.** As a researcher, I visited the classroom to collect data for oral/pictorial responses on three separate occasions during a three-month period of time. On each occasion, the teacher orally read a story to the children but did not discuss the book. After the students heard the story, they were instructed to "Draw anything you want to about the book." When they finished their pictures, I talked to the children on a one to one basis about their pictures. I asked each of the children, "Tell me about your picture." If any of the children gave a minimal response, I asked, "Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the picture?" All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed and all pictures were retained.

Approximately two weeks after each pictorial/oral response was recorded, the teacher read another book to the students. Students were then instructed to "Write anything you want to about the book." All responses were collected. Classroom discussion did not take place during any responses because the purpose of the study was to look at individual constructions of meaning. Each response was assessed using an instrument devised to examine the degree to which the response reflected a personal aesthetic experience of the literary work (Wiseman, Many, and Altieri, 1992). Table 1 provides a brief description of each level of aesthetic involvement. The lowest level of aesthetic involvement is a *one*, and the highest level is a *six*. Examples from the first-grade children follow to illustrate each level of the instrument.

### **Level 1**

*The book was good. I had fun.*

When children wrote responses coded at level one, no specific aspects of the text or illustrations were mentioned. The responses written at this level were vague.

**Table 1**  
**Levels of Aesthetic Involvement**

Level	Description
1	Little or no presence of story experience.
2	Slight evidence of story experience.
3	Evidence of story experience with little presence of aesthetic elements.
4	Some presence of aesthetic elements which directly relate to the story experience.
5	Detailed presence of aesthetic elements which give evidence of the personal involvement in the story experience.
6	Highly inventive and mature presence of aesthetic elements which enhance the personal significance of the story experience.

**Note.** Aesthetic Elements: Visualizing scenes or characters, making associations between the story and literary or life experiences, relating emotions evoked, putting self in character's shoes, passing judgements on character's behavior, discussing preferences, citing metacognitive awareness of living through the story, hypothesizing alternative outcomes, discussing personal relevance of story experience (Corcoran, 1987; Cox and Many, 1992; Many, 1990, 1991; Many and Wiseman, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1985).

**Level 2**

*That is a fox. I drew it cause I wanted to.*

At this level children would mention some specific element of the text. In this example, the fox was mentioned. Although elements were mentioned, there was no attempt to show a relationship between them. Included at this level were responses where children simply listed characters or words in the story.

### Level 3

*This is the wolf and they are pulling out the tooth and here is the dentist and the dentist's wife and they are pulling out the rotten tooth of the fox.*

At this level, children clearly revealed the story experience. Not only were specific references made to aspects of the text, but connections were made between them. These responses often consisted of retellings of a story.

### Level 4

*She's on the bed and she just noticed she has antlers. I liked the part when she woke up and she had antlers, and she's real surprised.*

This level of response moved beyond level three in level of aesthetic involvement. At this level, children selected and shared what was personally significant for them. The most common type of response was to share a favorite part.

### Level 5

*I like the part when Ponzo kept eating and he was getting fatter and then his friends helped him. That means his friends cared about him.*

Here the response was more detailed. Not only were personally significant parts shared, but also the reason why these parts were relevant.

### Level 6

*Willie was walking down and he said I am such a hero and then he just wasn't looking where he was going and he ran into the pole. He was so big when he exercised his clothes popped off so he doesn't wear clothes anymore. He was just thinking he was a hero but he really wasn't.*

A high level of aesthetic involvement was readily apparent in this level of response. The children wove from the text to a personal experience and back into the text. This was a very sophisticated response.

### **Looking at children's response**

Only students present for each of the six books were used in data analysis. Quantitative analysis of the responses to the six books consisted of a double repeated measures analysis of variance. Independent variables were the modality of response (written or pictorial/oral) and the time of response (first, second, or third visit). The dependent variable was the aesthetic level achieved by the student on the response.

The analysis enabled me to determine if growth was evident over the three month period of time. It was also used to compare the growth indicated on the pictorial/oral responses to the written responses to see if a significant difference existed between the quality shown on the two types of responses.

### **Results and discussion**

The results indicated that aesthetic growth can be measured over time by analyzing either written or pictorial/oral responses ( $p > .0001$ ). Students demonstrated significant growth during the three month period in the aesthetic quality of their responses. Also a pictorial/oral response was just as valid a measure of growth as a written response. On the overall differences, the mean levels on the aesthetic quality of the oral responses were higher than those found in the written responses. The difference in growth exhibited by the pictorial/oral modality as compared to the written responses reached significance at the  $p > .05$  level.

## Educational importance

For those who feel that oral responses are not as important as written responses, it is interesting to note that the children actually demonstrated higher aesthetic growth when responding orally. It appears from the data that children often responded with a preconceived structure when writing about the story. This often involved retelling the plot or sequence of events. One example of this was a student named Amber. Amber did not demonstrate any growth in the aesthetic quality of her written responses. On Amber's first written response she wrote:

*"Abiyoyo was eating the sheaps and cows. then the boy and his fother got up. and then the boy lookt out side and he saw ABiyoyo out side on a hill. and then they wokt out side. and the peopl sead "Don't go over there he will eat you. and they sead "no" then the boy and his fother the boy startied playing his yklaly. and then ABiyoyo started dasing. and then ABiyoyo fel downne bing wit his fother wond. and then ABiyoyo dsupear. and they wer groid. and thats the end."*

Although this was a very detailed account of the story, it was precisely that, a retelling. Her next written response, even more brief, followed a similar format.

*"One day the tub man, the wman, the granmother the dokr the pleasman, the cilde and the dog wer all standing on the tub. Al of the people some times the people wing ther iss."*

Her last written response was merely a statement of which character she liked in the story, with very little evidence of the story experience. "I like Ponzo and the other characters."



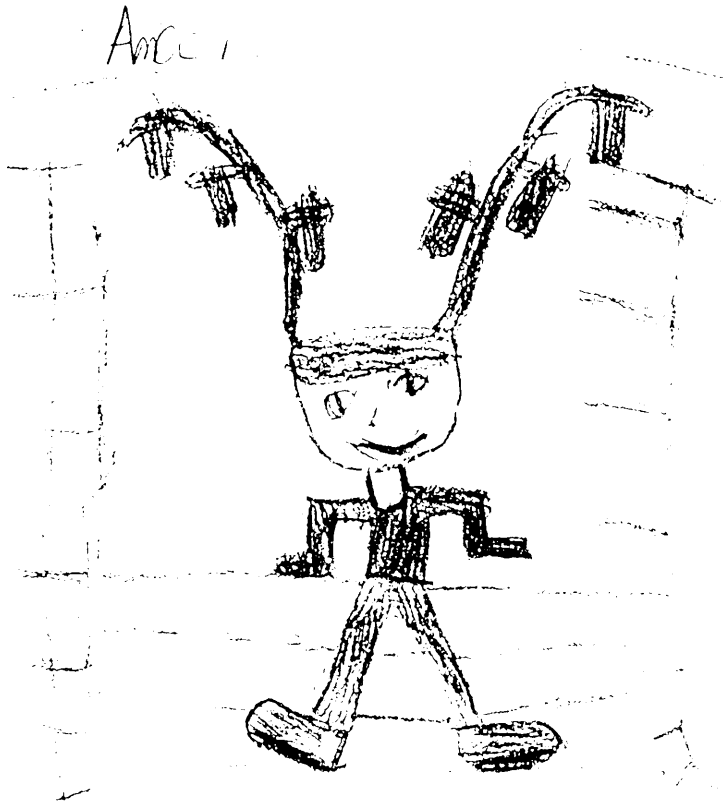
When Amber drew and discussed her pictures, aesthetic growth was evident. On our first meeting in February, Amber discussed her picture in much the same way that she wrote during the entire three month period.

**Figure 1**  
*The illustration Amber drew and discussed after listening to Dr. Desoto (Steig, 1982)*



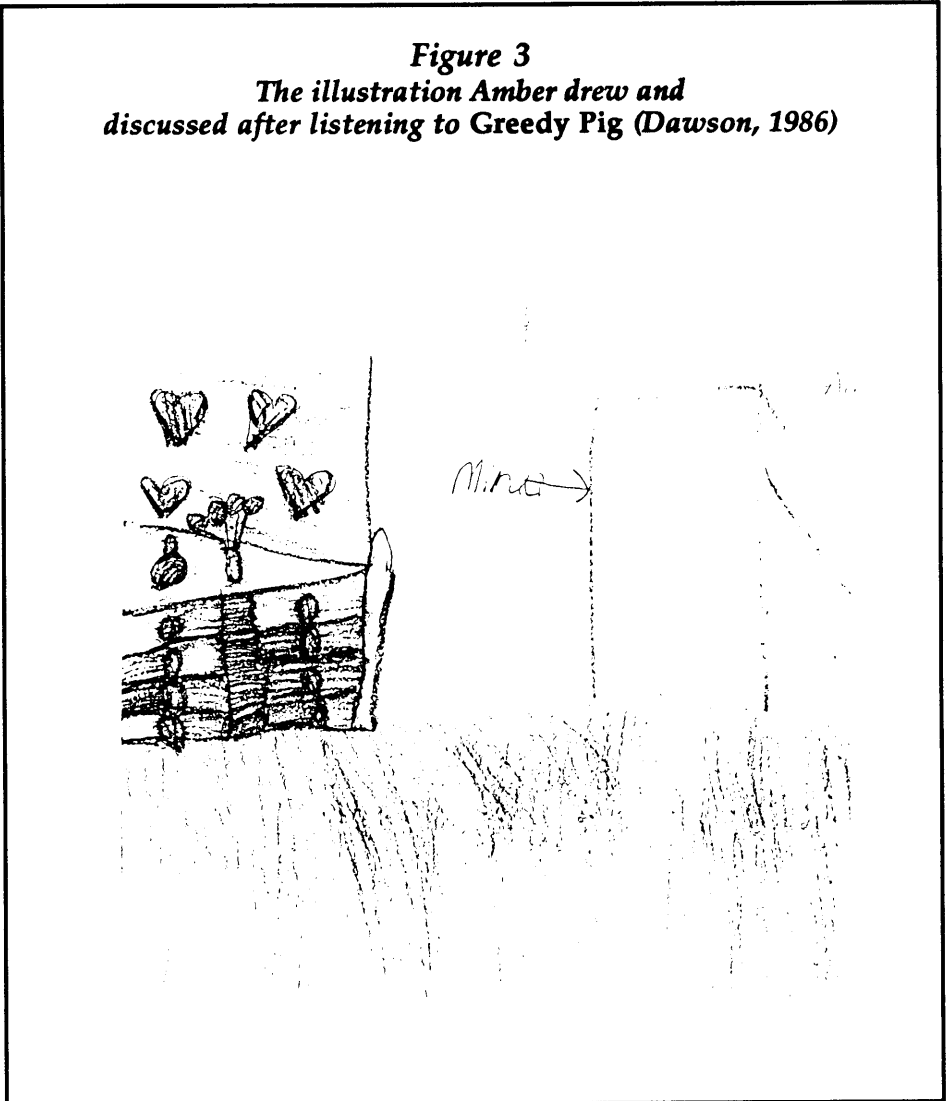
"It is when his teeth are stuck together." This brief response showed some evidence of the story experience, yet it expressed very little aesthetic involvement. During the second visit, Amber demonstrated not only evidence of the story experience but also displayed involvement in the story.

*Figure 2*  
*The illustration Amber drew and discussed*  
*after listening to Imogene's Antlers (Small, 1985)*



"It was when she was walking down the stairs to go get breakfast. That was my favorite part." Finally, on the last visit to the classroom, she demonstrated a much more sophisticated response.

**Figure 3**  
*The illustration Amber drew and discussed after listening to Greedy Pig (Dawson, 1986)*



*"This is when he's looking in the mirror and he has flowers on that little mirror thing there and hearts, perfume. That's for his mother. He has green carpet. I thought it was funny because when he looked in the mirror he had big muscles and it looked funny."*

Although pictorial/oral responses often revealed the children becoming part of the story experience, allowing children to respond through pictures has often been de-emphasized in the school setting. This research indicates it may be very important.

Educators also need to acknowledge the importance of oral skill development. According to Graves (1973), "Writing is usually intended to be read by another person at another time. Six and seven year old children are basically oriented to immediate communication (as in oral exchange) with messages being returned within the minute." He continues by discussing that if children expect to receive little feedback on writing, there may be a motivational factor involved.

Perhaps since the children were allowed to share their ideas orally, there was a greater incentive to become actively engaged in the text. If they saw writing as merely a school assignment, this might help to account for the lack of growth demonstrated in the written responses. If this is the case, then teachers must be sure that oral interaction is provided on written work. Perhaps cooperative groups will help to achieve this. The value of social interaction is considered by many theorists to be of great importance in order for learning to occur (Vygotsky, 1986).

Oral, pictorial, and written text need to be more interrelated in education. In the research with young children that has included many of these modalities, the benefits have been

visible. In a study discussed in *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*, Haste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) discuss a six year old:

*Once she has made the decision to draw the words she cannot spell, she moves freely between writing and art to placeholder meaning. By listening to Michelle we get a good picture of what constraints she sees operating in this setting. It is important to understand that this significant literacy event would have been lost if we had examined only product and not process. Strategies and constraints which are frozen in adult writing once again become visible (pg. 20).*

By listening to Amber discuss the pictures, it was evident that more could be gained by listening to her than reading her connected discourse. Perhaps the constraints that she felt when writing interfered with her being able to demonstrate a high level of aesthetic involvement in the stories.

"It is not children — but adults — who have separated writing from art, song, and play; it is adults who have turned writing into an exercise on dotted-line paper, into a matter of rules, lessons, and cautious behavior" (Calkins, 1986). Perhaps if teachers reconsider what writing means, students will demonstrate a higher level of involvement in texts. According to Dyson, children are unique and have very different styles of communicating. She states that, "within any one task, children will orchestrate — draw upon — their developing knowledge in diverse ways" (Dyson, 1989).

Children display literacy skills in very unique ways. A classroom should allow children to respond in a variety of ways. Since a primary goal of reading is to build life-long readers, we must reevaluate how to get young children involved with stories. It might be necessary for teachers to

realize that not only are oral responses viable but they can also serve as valid indicators of a child's aesthetic growth in response to literature.

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