

TEACHING EFL/ESL LITERATURE

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Abstract

There has been an increasing awareness of the significance of integrating literature in EFL/ESL curriculum. Two pedagogically effective approaches to teaching L1 narrative texts which have been gaining popularity in EFL/ESL literature are The Story Grammar and The Reader Response. The purpose of this paper is to present the rationale and conceptualization underlying both approaches and how they are used in EFL/ESL classrooms.

There has been an increasing awareness of the significance of integrating literature in EFL/ESL curriculum. The traditional structurally-based texts, and the newer, integrated, communicative courses might not be sufficient for the demands of academic classes. On the other hand, a syllabus that is based, or that draws heavily on authentic stories, provides a motivating medium for language learning while fostering the development of the thinking skills that are needed for L2 academic literacy. Literature can also act as a powerful change agent by developing pupils' intercultural awareness while at the same time nurturing empathy, a tolerance for diversity, and emotional intelligence (Ghosn, 2002, p.172). Emotional intelligence, which is essential for empathy and tolerance, is the understanding of feelings, both of one's own and the others (Goleman, 1995).

There are two pedagogically effective approaches to teaching L1 narrative texts which have been gaining popularity in EFL/ESL literature: the "Story Grammar Approach" (SGA) and the "Reader Response Approach" (RRA). The purpose of this paper is to present the rationale and conceptualization underlying both approaches and how they are used in EFL/ESL classrooms.

Story Grammar

A recent area of research related to an interactive conceptualization of reading is story grammar (Ripley and Blair, 1989, p. 209). Story Grammar is based on the conceptualization that readers should be consciously aware of text structure. According to this conceptualization, reading comprehension is an interactive process, an interchange of ideas or a transaction between the reader and the text (Harris and Hodges, 1995, p. 203). The reader interacts with the text and relates ideas from the text to prior experiences to construct meaning. A part of this process requires the reader understands how the author has organized his ideas, i.e. the text structure. "Text structure" is a term used to describe the various patterns of how concepts within text are related. Two important types of text

structure are narrative and expository. Narrative texts tell a story and are the type usually found in literature selections. Expository texts provide information and facts and are the type usually found in science and social studies selections. The types are organized differently, so that readers must use their comprehension processes differently when reading these different types of texts.

Research indicates that teaching learners strategies for focusing on text structure enhances their comprehension and improves their recall of information presented in text (Taylor and Beach, 1984; Berkowitz, 1986; Wilkinson, 1999). Hence, learners need to be taught how to read different types of text. They need to learn different strategies for different text types (Beach and Appleman, 1984, p.116).

Readers can be assumed to have knowledge of discourse conventions or “textual schemata” that assist in text processing. That is, they have expectations about what they will encounter when they read stories, personal letters, research reports, or telegrams (Garner, 1988, p.116). They use their schemata and clues from the text in varying amounts as they comprehend (Spiro, 1979). Effective readers use an interactive process that both relies on their schemata and requires them to obtain information from text. Even though these two processes occur simultaneously as readers comprehend, it is the readers’ schemata that provide the structure needed to associate meaning with text (Anderson and Pearson, 1984).

A story grammar represents the basic structure of a narrative text. It is the system of rules used for describing the consistent features found in narrative texts (Mandler, 1984). These rules describe the story parts, arrangement of the parts, and how the parts are related, i.e. the internal structure of the story. Story grammars assume that stories have several unique parts that are conceptually separable, though rarely explicitly partitioned. These parts are usually identified inferentially by the reader. There is evidence that such a grammar provides the basis for retrieval of information from story (Thorndyke, 1977, p. 77).

Although there are several different conceptualizations of story grammar (e.g. Harris and Hodges, 1995; Leu and Kinzer, 1995; Burns et al., 1999), all of them include the same basic components (Schmidt and O’Brien, 1986). A simple conceptualization of story grammar is presented by Cooper (1986, p. 270-271). According to this model, a story may be composed of several different “episodes”, each consisting of “a setting, characters, a problem, action and resolution of the problem”. The *setting* is the place and time at which the story occurs. The *characters* are the people or animals who carry out the action. The *problem* is the situation around which an episode is organized. The *action* is what happens, or what characters do, as a result of the problem; it is made up of *events* that lead to the solution of the problem, which is called the *resolution*. A story has a *theme*: the basic idea about which the whole story is written, or the lesson the reader learns at the end of the story. By identifying these elements the reader identifies the story’s grammar.

A story schema, on the other hand, is the mental representation that readers have of story parts and their relationships (Lehr, 1987, p. 550). Thus, the basic difference between a

story grammar and a story schema is that the story grammar deals with the text whereas the story schema deals with what readers have in their heads about how stories are organized (Amer, 1992).

Direct instruction in story grammar involves helping learners to recognize the elements of narrative text and use these elements to improve their comprehension of the story. Instruction begins with explicitly presenting the concept of story grammar (setting, characters, problem, action, resolution and theme). The teacher may use, depending on the learners linguistic ability, the native language. A strategy teachers may use involves dividing the story into meaningful episodes and developing comprehension questions they will ask in guided silent reading and discussion. Such questions will cause students to focus on the relevant elements in the story. An episode may consist of one chapter or more. Research has shown that asking questions that focus on the story line leads to improved learner comprehension of the story (Beck, 1984; Leu and Kinzer, 1995; Burns et al., 1999). Teachers ask learners to read, at home, the parts that form an episode and provide them with guiding questions that bring out the elements of the story grammar. In the classroom, learners are asked to read silently the parts of the episode which draw their attention to the story grammar. This is followed by answering the guiding questions and discussing the structure of the episode. The guiding questions may be similar to the following (adapted from Cooper, 1986, p. 382-384):

- Setting:* Where did the story happen?
When did the story happen?
- Characters:* Who was the story about?
Who were the people in the story?
Who was the most important person in the story?
- Problem:* Did the people have a problem?
What was the big problem that story was about?
- Action:* What did the people do to solve the problem?
What were the important things that happened in the story?
- Resolution:* How did the people solve the problem?
How did the story end?
- Theme:* What lesson could we learn from the story?

Amer (1992) investigated the effect of story Grammar instruction on EFL sixth grade students' comprehension of narrative text. Results indicated that direct instruction in story grammar seems to help EFL students abstract the episodic sequence and the metastructure of the story. Students developed a mental representation of the story, i.e. a story schema, which helped them focus on main ideas and remove unnecessary details.

Teachers may use visual or graphic representations to illustrate the story grammar. Visual or graphic representation of text structure helps learners comprehend and retain textually important information. Besides, when learners learn how to use and construct visual or graphic representations, they learn a reading strategy that allows them to identify what parts of text are important and how the ideas or concepts are related (Vacca and Vacca, 1999, p. 400). Character maps (figure 1) and story maps (Willis, 2002) (figure 2) are two common formats used to visually represent key components of a story. These activities

may be used individually, in pairs, or cooperatively. Reutzel (1985, p. 401) found story maps to be a good alternative to the traditional question and discussion session following the reading of a story. They enhance reading comprehension by helping students to store and retrieve information, make connections between previous experience and reading materials, identify relationships among concepts and events, organize specific details, and understand the message embedded in the text.

Name of the character: -----
Character trait: -----
Character trait: -----
Character trait: -----
.....

Figure (1): Character Map

Title of the Story:						
<table border="1"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Setting:</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">.....</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">.....</td> </tr> </table>	Setting:			
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<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Major Events:</td> </tr> <tr> <td>1-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>5-</td> </tr> </table>	Major Events:	1-	2-	3-	4-	5-
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Ending/ Resolution:						
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.....	
Theme:	

Figure (2): Story Map

A variation of the story map is the story frame. A story frame may be used, as a post-reading activity, to test learners' comprehension of the story grammar. Story frames focus on the story structure rather than specific content (Cudd and Roberts, 1987, p. 740). They employ a gap-filling procedure. Instead of only one word being left out of a sentence, key phrases or clauses are left out of a paragraph that summarizes the story or highlights some important aspects of the story. [An example of a story frame (Fowleer, 1982) is presented in figure (3)]. Amer (1992) modified the story frame so that every missing key sentence or clause is replaced by a question word. Learners have to answer the questions in the blank lines

In this story, the problem starts when ----- ----- . After that ----- ----- . Next, ----- ----- . Then, ----- ----- . The problem ends with ----- ----- .

Figure (3): Story Frame

It is noteworthy that story maps, character maps and other concept maps may be generated using computer programs. Two programs written to produce maps are *Inspiration*, which is for middle school and older children, and *kidspiration*, which is for younger readers. Both programs work well in a small group or whole class setting when the visual display is presented through a large screen monitor or projected on a screen. Maps may be printed out for readers to work independently. Another feature of the two programs is that not only can the information be viewed as a map, but it can also be viewed as an outline. This feature helps readers make a connection between the graphic representation and its outline format. The two programs feature blank formats so the teacher can create a customized map and templates so the teacher may utilize a preset model for organizing story information. The templates may be customized, but they provide a good basis for beginning the creation of a new map (Slaton, 2001, p. 3).

Reader Response Approach

The Reader Response Approach (RRA) is having a growing influence on EFL literature classes (Carlisle, 2000, p. 12). The reason is to encourage EFL learners to study literature for literature's sake, rather than for the mere attainment of language skills, which is the popular practice in most EFL classes (Ali, 1994, p. 289). In these classes, a novel in one hand and a dictionary in the other, learners plough their way through the

pages looking up the new vocabulary until they “understand” the story. Their focus of attention is not on the experience they have *while* reading, but on what facts they can retain for use *after* reading is over. The story is not being read as literature but as a piece of information (Carlisle 2000, p. 13). Hence, the teaching of literature is seen as an information-gathering exercise rather than an aesthetic experience in which the reader has a *response* to the event, which involves the organizing of his thoughts and feelings about the text (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 40). Benton and Fox (1990, pp. 2-18) identifies four elements of *response* to text: *Anticipating/retrospecting*: guesses about what is going to happen next, what events lead to the current situation, and how the book is going to end; *picturing*: images that come into the mind’s eye, such as a character’s face or a scene described in the book; *interacting*: opinions on a character’s personality and actions or feelings about events and situations; *evaluating* : comments on the skill of the writer.

The RRA is based on *Constructivism*. It views the reading process as a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader, with his past experiences, beliefs, expectations and assumptions, interacts with the perspectives in the text, and meaning is determined as the result of this transaction (Ali,1994, p. 290). Thus, reading, in this approach, is a reflective and creative process and meaning is self-constructed. The meaning and structure of the text are not inherent in the print but are invited by the author and imputed to the text by the reader (Swaffer, 1988, p.124). In other words, readers are independent makers of meaning. They view text as a construct. They construct their own meaning. They question the author’s values against their own values; they differentiate between fiction and reality; they are able to discuss and evaluate forms of narration and cultural values of the implied author (Thomson, 1987).

The aim of The Reader Response Approach is to encourage learners to *respond* to the text and express their own ideas, opinions and feelings freely. Thus, learners should realize that the main concern is not “What they understand” but “how they feel”. Therefore, the teacher should accept “multiple interpretations” to a text rather than just one “correct interpretation” (Rosenblatt, 1995). From a pedagogic perspective, “multiple interpretations” allow for creative and critical thinking to take place in an atmosphere where there are no threats nor any compulsion to learn for the “correct” answer or to compete for the “best” interpretation.

Before using the RRA in classrooms, teachers should first introduce the RRA. They should explain to students the main ideas and assumptions underlying the RRA outlined above. Teachers should discuss with their students the difference between “reading literature” and “reading for information”. Students should be consciously aware of their contribution to the text.

Several activities and techniques have been used to implement the RRA in literature classrooms: *Reading Logs* (Benton and Fox, 1985; Carlisle, 2000); *Response Journal* (Sheridan, 1991); *Writing Prompts* (Pritchard, 1993); *Critical Questioning and Writing* (Probst, 1994; Hirvela, 1996); *Self-questioning* (Davis,1989); *Role-play, Drama and Letter-writing* (Elliot, 1990; Baxter, 1999); *Rewriting Narratives from Another Character’s Point of View* (Oster, 1989). It is not the purpose of this paper to present a detailed review of such activities and techniques. Interested readers can refer to the

references. Only two activities are presented as examples: *The Developmental Model of Reader-Response Approach* (Figure 4) (Thomson, 1987) and *Reading Logs* (Figure 5) (Benton 1992, p. 35; Carlisle, 2000).

Level 1: Literal understanding

Students give summaries of the events of the story. Understanding of the story is at a very *superficial* level. Students are merely narrating the information in the text.

Level 2: Empathy

Students are involved in the story. They *identify* some aspects of the story with their own lives. They also have *imaginative sympathy* with one of the characters in the story, and this sympathy can range from reacting with the character to imagining how the character feels.

Level 3: Analogy

From the readings, students make connections between the characters and their lives, and from, this, they learn about their own lives.

Level 4: Interpretation

Students reflect on the significance of events and behaviours in the text. Their reflections lead to generalizations and evaluations of the *characters* and *theme* of the story.

Level 5: Evaluation of fiction

Students view text as a *construct*. They question the author's values against their own values; they differentiate between *fiction* and *reality*; they are able to discuss and evaluate *forms of narration* and social and cultural values of the *implied author*.

Level 6: Recognition

Students make a conscious effort to consider their relationship with the text; they gain implications of constructedness (aspects of level 5) for their own *self-understanding*. They become more aware of their *reading process* and how they arrive at the meaning of a text. They are also able to evaluate their relationship with the *implied reader*.

Figure (4): Developmental model of a reader-response approach

While you are reading the book write down all the things that go on in your head in a "stream of consciousness" style. As you read, you will be making a record of images, associations, feelings, thoughts, judgments, etc. You will probably find that this record will contain:

Questions that you ask yourself about characters and events as you read. (Answer these yourself when you can.)

Memories from your own experience provoked by the reading.

Guesses about how you think the story will develop, and why.

Reflections on striking moments and ideas in the book.

Comparisons between how you behave and how the characters in the novel are behaving.

Thoughts and feelings about characters and events.

Comments on how the story being told. For example, any words or phrases or even whole passages that make an impression on you, or motifs which you notice the author keeps using.

Connections to other texts, ideas and courses.

An outline of the chapter, no longer than a paragraph.

Please date each entry, and note down the time and place, as well as the mood you are in while reading.

Please note down the page number you are reading when you make an entry.

Please take pleasure and pride in your log.

Please do not try to rewrite the book.

Figure (5): Reading logs.

It is noteworthy that some EFL Teacher Education programs have acknowledged the pedagogic effectiveness of the Reader Response Approach. Thus, the approach has been integrated in such programs to train EFL/ESL prospective teachers to use this approach in literature classes (Franklin et al., 1999).

In conclusion, although the Story Grammar Approach and Reader Response Approach are based on different theoretical conceptualizations, they should be seen as complementing each other rather than in opposition to each other. The SG may be used with beginners and intermediate learners since they may not possess the linguistic ability to express themselves freely. It may be also used with advanced learners as an introductory activity to Reader Response. Besides, SG focuses on the cognitive aspect of learning whereas RR focuses on the affective aspect of the learner, i.e. his feelings, emotions, free expression, and opinions.

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