

# Teaching Communicative Competence Based on the Schematic Structure of Stories (Story Grammar)

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**Abstract:** *The article deals with the approach to teaching communicative competence using the technique of teaching language through literature. Short narratives or stories are considered to be a good resource to facilitate English grammar teaching and learning. Story grammar-based multiple activities serve to develop learners language skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening by stimulating imagination and broadening their mind.*

**Keywords:** communicative language teaching, grammatical competence, literature-based reading, story structure, schema-theoretic principles.

## 1. Introduction

A number of studies have researched (e.g., Aski, 2000; Carrell, 1988; Carter, 1986; Ellis, 1999; Nuttall, 1982) the most effective way of development communicative competence, enabling learners to use language for communicative purposes. While grammatical competence is an important dimension of communicative competence, several proposals have been made on ways to combine grammar instruction with the provision of opportunities for communication in a contemporary ESL classroom.

Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge learners have of a language that accounts for their ability to produce sentences in a language. It refers to knowledge of the building blocks of sentences (e.g., parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, sentence patterns) in a particular speech community.

## 2. Methodology

Recent approach to communicative style of grammar teaching/learning touches on the use of extended literature in the form of short narratives or stories which structure is to be incorporated into people's knowledge systems as a SCHEMA. The idea of language learning from story originates from the theory of story grammar defined by Richards and Schmidt (2002) as a theory of the cognitive representation of narrative texts, including simple stories, folk tales, fables and narratives. It is admitted that people access story grammars consciously or unconsciously when encountering and following different types of stories and narratives used as a source of prediction, inference, comparison, evaluation in understanding.

Story, according to the South African Concise Oxford Dictionary (Kavanagh & Pearsall 2002), is defined as "an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment ... a plot or story line ... a report of an item of news in a newspaper, magazine, or news broadcast ... a piece of gossip; a rumour ... a false statement or explanation; a lie ... an account of past events in someone's life or in the evolution of something".

Narrative texts characterized by the interrelationships among the common elements, the kinds of situations, events, actors, actions and goals are suggested to be used as basis for language learning in ESL classrooms. Cate (1977) argues that telling tales and indulging in literature "is a habit that seems as integral a part of our nature as breathing and sleeping". Britton (1977) refers to humans as deliberate "proliferators of images". Randell (1999) advocates that it extremely motivates learners to continue reading in order to find out what happens next; it usually makes readers satisfy with the conclusion; it allows for the development of students' logical thought processes; and it requires proper and precise use of language. Yang (2001) notes that from high literature to traditional stories and to modern science-fiction stories all tap into the same narrative structure and can therefore be applied successfully for language teaching purposes.

It becomes clear from the discussion that one reason to use narrative as a suitable source of input, a "viable possibility" and a "universal need" in modern ESL classroom is the use of traditional story (or narrative) structure, consisting of four main elements: firstly, the settings, the major setting of the overall story and the minor settings that change with different episodes in the story; secondly, the theme, referring to the stated or the implied goal of the main character(s) in the story, and to the author's intent that can be inferred from the story; thirdly, the plot, which includes the initiating event that marks a change in the story line and the need for a character's response; inner response of the character; action or what the character actually does; consequence of the character's action; the reaction to the character's action and its degree of success, and finally, the resolution of the problem, which is the direct consequence in a single episode, or the overall result of the actions within the entire story in terms of the theme of the story, the author's potential message, or the characters' depicted main goal.

The advantage of story and story structure is that it allows learners to examine the language it contains. Moreover literature-based reading helps students gain knowledge that provides a rich foundation for discussions comparing and contrasting texts, authors' styles, and treatment of issues and themes. Thus it is one reason which strongly approves the use of narrative in the ESL classroom.

Another reason to use narrative in ESL learning is the fact that stories carry meaning. Allowing learners to make meaning is one of the aims of communicative language teaching. With no meaning, the structures and functions of language are simply abstractions which have no communicative value (Aski 2000). Carter advocates (Carter 2007) engaging learners with such a process that reveals for understanding the meanings of texts, not in order to disclose any one single universal meaning but for what it may reveal and mean to the reader in and out of the classroom.

Evidently books provide strong intrinsic motivation for readers and an emphasis on meaning rather than form, increase exposure to the target language being the basis for discussion about the pictures and story. In discursive classroom environments to construct meanings for unknown vocabulary items learners should have general background knowledge. Through the broad perspective of “grammatical element as carrier of meaning potential,” language users come to understand precisely how grammatical choice can serve as means for expressing complex ideas, subjective reactions, and personal stances vis à vis events, situations, persons, outcomes, and so forth—without the bookish, stilted, or “textbook” type of language that so often emerges in non-neutral, spontaneous discourse by learners. This approach to linguistic awareness also serves to help learners avoid sounding theatrical, scripted, or pragmatically inappropriate in subjectively and affectively influenced discursive environments.

One more reason to use narrative is that it provides ESL learners with insight into the culture of their target language, i.e. the characters of stories are shown in contexts which are accurate reflections of the English-speaking culture. From the schema-theoretic viewpoint and the principles of communicative language teaching, reading of literature, or, narrative, is considered central as the most obvious source of making sense of texts or “*textuality*” – the sense that language is alive (Ellis) – through coherence, cohesion, discourse markers, learners also develop skills of interpretation. Widdowson (1975) suggests that the study of literature should not be limited to either language usage or cultural content, but that literature should be viewed as discourse and the study of literature as “an inquiry into the way a language is used to express a reality other than that expressed by conventional means” (ibid.:83).

### 3. Main aspects of integrative approach

It is evident that when using narrative as input, the teaching vocabulary and the four main language skills should be interwoven.

Teaching pre-reading vocabulary is suggested to activate certain schemata that learners need when negotiating the text. Gajdusek (1988) identifies the following vocabulary items as words of which the meaning is to be derived from the text; words which contain clues vital to the emotional or cultural context of the text, and words which proficient readers “merely categorize”.

Taking in consideration the fact, that vocabulary items in narrative texts carry meaning and hold images by virtue of

the context in which they are placed, they are more likely to be remembered by learners and used in the process. Surely learners should gain independence from their dictionaries. It can be achieved through activities that use cognate identifiers, guessing meaning from context and interpreting morphological information from the text.

Carrell (1988) suggests several activities for teaching vocabulary items from narrative texts, including discussion of the text, text previewing, discussion of key vocabulary, key-word association games and word maps. He suggests that word maps can be used to teach synonyms, antonyms, homophones, superordinates, subordinates, even attributes, definitions and reverses. When studying synonyms and antonyms it is suggested to focus learners on distinctions between words rather than on similarities. Learners should discuss why the author chose a specific word in a certain context rather than any suitable synonym. Besides, idioms, metaphors and words with more than one possible meaning are recommended to be taught more explicitly (in order to make them more accessible) through the study of phonics, structural clues and morphology (affixes) (Nuttal 1982; Marckwardt 1978). These are all skills that need to be honed prior to actual reading. So pre-reading activities are of two aims: a) build new knowledge, b) tap into existing background knowledge. It becomes obvious from the information above that the teaching of vocabulary cannot be separated from the teaching of reading.

When applying the principles of communicative language teaching, reading of literature, or, narrative, is considered central as “the most obvious source of authentic FL language input and of contexts for discussion, interaction, and writing exercises”, yet it is often avoided in favour of pair work with the emphasis on grammar, vocabulary and other functional interactions (Aski 2000). Reading is suggested to be taught in atmosphere of understanding “fictional conflicts, complexities, and points of view”, where learners can explore them and express themselves “at no great personal risk”. Nuttal (1982) suggests extensive reading and teaching learners to infer meaning from context which would greatly aid learners in comprehension as well as increase their reading speed.

### 4. Reading Strategies

Specific reading strategies have been suggested to avoid dependence on dictionaries.

*Content prediction strategy* – serves to develop learners’ ability to predict what will happen next through extension activities: titling sections of text; completing omitted parts of text according to first and last sentences of paragraphs; re-ordering scrambled sentences or paragraphs, unscrambling mixed texts; completing imaginary conversations, predicting the ending of a story.

*Syntactic guesses strategy* – serves to increase reading speed. Povey (1987) believes that it is far harder to uncover “cultural misapprehension” than to uncover syntactic ignorance, which he suggests can be rectified by the use of a dictionary.

Pre-reading activities serves to help learners anticipate linguistic as well as cultural problems and allow learners, according to Gajdusek (1988), genuine involvement with literary texts. These activities are used to “prescribe reactions”, stimulate interaction in the classroom, promote “word-attack skills” and encourage vocabulary growth (ibid.). This is where cultural difficulties and assumptions should be introduced in the same manner as new vocabulary is introduced prior to the initial reading (Povey 1979).

The use of questions in line with learners’ cognitive level is suggested as one of pre-reading activities. Long (1986) makes use of pre-reading questions only to create a receptive mental attitude with learners, stimulating a “willingness to respond” to the narrative text. Nuttal (1982) advocates the use of “signpost questions” with the particular purpose to guide learners in silent reading and to direct their focus to areas of importance in the text after having read most of the story. Signpost questions provide “conscious consideration of the meaning of the text” (ibid.). Gajdusek (1988) suggests questions on point of view (who the narrative is related by), character (who the narrative is about), the setting (where, when, and in which the narrative takes place), and finally action (what it is that happens) for interactive and communicative lessons based on the text (ibid.:239). No doubt, asking and answering grammar questions students are forced to think logically and are involved into process of perceiving grammar as a natural part of the whole language complex.

This agrees with Povey (1979) suggestion to move from factual questions to interpretative questions, to eliminate possible problems in advance. In this regard the “final concern” of the teacher is “to elicit the learner response to the entire presentation”. Povey (1979) argues that the most effective way to present a text is to make possible some measure of impact during the initial reading.

Presentation of narrative texts is suggested in the literature to be done in several ways. Long (1986) advocates the use of silent reading, choral reading and pre-recorded readings. To hold learners’ interest he also suggests to present different parts of the text and different questions in different modes. He is of the idea to replace lecture style presentation as a “uni-directional” process by a “multi-directional” presentation mode.

*Post-reading strategies* are suggested for application after learners have completed reading a narrative text keeping in communicative language learning. Serving to integrate new knowledge gained from narrative text with existing schemata, they are based on specific activities, such as: dramatization of key scenes (Gajdusek 1988), text discussions, writing activities and review of hypotheses (Carrell 1988). Post-reading text-mapping is suggested to allow learners to represent information from the text in any type of visual display, to clarify relationships among key concepts (ibid.: 248-249) as well as timelines are recommended to clarify actions and relationships between events (Gajdusek 1988). The use of summary as an activity is suggested by Carter (1986) to focus attention on the general meaning of a story though the word count limiting learners are forced to select what is significant. Thus good

linguistic exercise in “syntactic-restructuring, deletion, and lexical re-shaping” takes place to enable learners in the process of interpretation and text engagement. Summary as an example of the integrated use of language and literature facilitates text recall.

Story as topic is suggested to stimulate creativity in learners and develop communicative skills in listening, speaking and writing.

Audio recordings of text are used as the presentation and introduction of the literature in the ESL course. Listening comprehension elicits global response through the following exercises:

- 1) Listen and choose/ tick (✓)/ fill in/ compare/ continue.
- 2) Listen and check understanding/the appropriateness/ the accuracy.
- 3) Listen and find differences/ retell/ discuss.
- 4) Listen and tell more about the problem in the story.
- 5) Listen and choose titles/ make a summary.

In order to stimulate oral work and develop speaking skills the way to debate and discuss opposite viewpoints, using texts which are relatively open and inexplicit is suggested by Carter (1986) and Gajdusek (1988). Being the integrative use of language and literature, such activities combine syntactical knowledge with textual evidence and allow learners to support or refute any given argument. Learners can be asked to analyze the text they have read in order of structure, theme and style. It is admitted that articulation of a story’s theme push learners to clarify the writer’s ideas expressed in the text. Involving learners into the process of reading sections of narrative aloud while imbibing the text with suitable emotion and feeling, is another suggestion to teach speaking as a language skill.

Writing as language skill can also benefit from the use of story as input in accordance with a communicative language learning. It is really useful to engage learners in guided re-writing activities with completely different communicative values, such as changing instructions into descriptions, or changing poetic language into formal lecture style. Among the most striking developments of writing skills Carter focuses on processes of rewriting from different angles and positions by ‘translating’ the text from one medium to another along an axis of spoken to written, verbal to visual, textual to dramatic (Carter 2007). Some writing activities based on narrative input could be done in the manner of creating posters, recommending the book to friends, developing board games based on texts and drawing up comparison charts comparing characters in terms of appearances, attitudes and preferences (Harris & Mahon 1997). To develop writing skills in the process of debating and discussing viewpoints are also used in writing. Moreover learners can be asked to write freely (free writing activity) about an idea or an event from the story they are about to read without making any reference to the text, which allows learners to write from their own experiences.

Petrosky (1982) supports writing a composition, saying that with certain kinds of compositions begins text comprehension (of literary as well as non-literary texts), and arguing that reading, responding and composing are all parts



of comprehension and attempting to account for them “outside of their interactions with each other” might lead to the building of “reductive models of human understanding”. Free response to audio, film or written text can be used for composition topics. Writing poetry is suggested to be a “direct and active” manner which allows ESL learners to experience literature rather than just analyze or critique it.

The keeping of literary journals is one more writing-type activity for responding to narrative text that allows learners to write plot summaries or character analyses, to discuss ideas of the stories, to express their ideas without risking about grades or the reaction of certain settings on characters, to explain what they understand the implications of a story’s end can be. Keeping journals helps learners understand better characters, situation, and issues of the narrative text. In accordance with schema theory this writing-type activity can provide a context in which sentence-level grammar can be taught to provide learners with the sense of its communicative function. For this purpose Gajdusek (1988) suggests learners to review contrary-to-fact conditional tenses asking them to write in response to a question like “How would ... story’s name...have been different if ... character ... had not been ... definitive characteristic ...?”.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up the inclusion of literature in the form of narrative or story in ESL teaching for communicative purposes reflects current views on the effective development of the four main language skills and helps teaching the main component of communicative competence – grammar competence – in an integrated manner through the activities that are linked to it.

Specific benefits of the inclusion of literature in the form of narrative or story in the communicative ESL teaching in accordance with schema theory are:

- 1) literature is considered an exploration of meaning;
- 2) learners are able to relate the textual material to their own knowledge being involved in the “cliff-hangers” of the story plot;
- 3) through reading and writing narrative texts, students are motivated to use their communication skills and increase their literacy ability;
- 4) through parallel reading and discussing problems of the narratives students repeat, recycle and create their own vocabulary in a natural manner;
- 5) Grammar structures are worked into the plot line; specifically created exercises allow students to apply those structures.
- 6) Thus, meaning-focused techniques should be integrated with communicative activities such as the one used in the current study to enhance learners’ literary language.

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