# The Effect of Story Grammar Instruction on EFL Students' Comprehension of Narrative Text

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Reading comprehension is an interactive process between the reader and the text. A recent area of research related to an interactive conceptualization of reading is story grammar. Research indicates that direct instruction of story grammar can improve reading comprehension of narrative text. Hence, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the effect of story grammar on EFL sixth grade students' comprehension of narrative text. Seventy students participated in the study. The experimental group (n=37) received instruction in story grammar. Two tests were used as dependent measures: a multiple-choice test and a story frame test. Results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group (n=33) on both tests. The findings indicate that direct instruction in story grammar seems to help EFL students abstract the episodic sequence and the metastructure of the story.

## INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is an interactive process between the reader and the text. The reader interacts with the text and relates ideas from the text to prior experiences to construct meaning. A part of this process requires that the reader understands how the author has organized his ideas, i.e. the text structure. Two important types of text structure are *narrative* and *expository*. Narrative texts tell a story and are the type of text 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 has showed that teaching students strategies for focusing on text structure enhances their comprehension (Taylor and Beach 1984). Hence, students 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: 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: 9). 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).

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## STORY GRAMMARS AND SCHEMATA

Two recent areas of research related to an interactive conceptualization of reading are story grammar and story schema (Ripley and Blair 1989: 209). A story grammar 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 a story (Thorndyke 1977: 77).

A story schema, on the other hand, is the mental representation that readers have of story parts and their relationships (Lehr 1987: 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.

Although there are several different conceptualizations of story grammar, all of them include the same basic components (Schmidt and O'Brien 1986). The present researcher adopted the conceptualization presented by Cooper (1986: 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.

Research on story grammar indicates that children gradually learn to comprehend more complicated stories as they move through the grades. Applebee (1978) has demonstrated that even pre-school children have a well developed sense of story. Stein and Glenn (1979) discovered that 5 year olds were acquainted with basic story grammar. Working with third, sixth and eleventh graders, Whaley (1981) found that they used a set of rules in anticipating particular structural elements and sequences of elements. Miller (1986), working with seventh and eight grade remedial students, concluded that revising stories to conform to a familiar story grammar led to better story comprehension. In general, older children, in the fifth grade and above, seem better able to recall and retell stories which do not have a

standard structure or do not present events in chronological order (Stein and Nezworski 1978). They are also better able to remember the characters' actions to solve the problem than younger children (Stein and Glenn 1979). In addition, several researchers have demonstrated that direct instruction of story grammar can improve reading comprehension and recall of story (Carnie and Kinder 1985: Gordon and Braun 1983: Morrow 1985: Varnhagen and Goldman 1986).

Direct instruction in story grammar involves helping students to learn to recognize the elements of narrative text and use these elements to improve their comprehension of the story. 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. Research has shown that asking questions that focus on the story line leads to improved student comprehension of the story (Beck 1984). Teachers ask students 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, the students 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: 382-284):

| | |
|---|---|
| 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 the 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? |

These questions may be adapted to serve the content of each episode in the story. For example, 'What problem did Keawe have (in this chapter)? What did he do to solve the problem?'

It is noteworthy that the above mentioned research on story grammar was conducted on English as a first language. To the best of the researcher's knowledge there has been no research done on story grammars with EFL students. Hence, the

purpose of this study was to answer the following question: What is the effect of story grammar instruction on EFL sixth-grade students' comprehension of narrative text?

## THE EXPERIMENT

The purpose of the present study was thus to investigate the effect of teaching EFL sixth grade students the elements of narrative text, i.e. story grammar on their reading comprehension of a story. The study was stimulated by some EFL teachers participating in an in-service training course in Egypt. The courses they taught contained narrative texts. Thus, the teachers asked: 'What is the appropriate strategy for teaching stories?' When asked to describe the strategy they used for teaching stories, most teachers reported that they asked students to prepare a chapter at home. In the classroom, they asked students to read some parts of it silently. Then they asked students some comprehension questions.

## METHOD

### Subjects
Seventy 6th grade female students participated in the study. They were divided into two groups. The experimental group contained 37 students and the control group contained 33. These students had been studying English as a foreign language for six years.

### Material
The story used in the study was *The Bottle Imp* by Howe (1987). Students had to read the story as part of the English syllabus. It is a short story consisting of ten chapters. These chapters were divided into five episodes (see Appendix 1 for the story grammar).

### Procedures
The teacher who taught the experimental group was trained by the researcher. She was provided with a Teacher's Guide which included the story grammar prepared by the researcher (see Appendix 1), the guiding questions to be asked on each episode and questions which develop the theme of the whole story.

Instruction lasted seven 50-minute sessions; two sessions per week. In the first session, the following simplified story was used to introduce students to the concept of story grammar (setting, characters, problem, action, resolution and theme).

> *Once upon a time, an old man lived happily with his sons in a small village. The man wanted to teach his sons the last lesson before his death. He brought a bundle of sticks and called his sons. 'Can you break this bundle of sticks, son?', the father said to his eldest son. The eldest son tried but he couldn't.*

*'Can you break this bundle, son?', the father said to his second son. The second son tried but he couldn't. 'Can you break this bundle of sticks, son?', the father said to his youngest son. The youngest son tried but he couldn't. Then, the father untied the bundle. He gave each son one stick. 'Now, can you break the stick?', the father said to his sons. Each son broke the stick. The father said to his sons: 'Now, have you learned the lesson?'*

Each student had a copy of the story. The teacher asked students to read the story silently. Then she asked them questions which brought out the elements of the story grammar. She gradually wrote the terms on the chalkboard and explained them both in English and Arabic. Finally, she asked them the theme question: 'What lesson did you learn from the story?'

After this, each episode of the main story was introduced in one session. Students were asked to prepare the chapters for each episode at home. They were provided with guiding questions in order to draw their attention to the structure of the episode. In the classroom, the teacher asked students to read silently certain parts which brought out the elements of the episode. This was followed by answering the guiding questions and discussing the episode structure. The seventh session was devoted to relating the episodes to each other and developing the theme of the story.

The researcher attended four of the seven sessions in order to provide the teacher with appropriate feedback.

The teacher of the control group was not aware of the experiment. She asked students to prepare chapters at home. In the classroom, she asked them to read some parts silently. Then she asked them some comprehension questions. She also taught the story in seven sessions.

### Testing materials and procedures
Two tests were used to measure students' comprehension of the story. The first test consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions (MCT). The second test was an adapted form of a story frame (SFT). Story frames (Cudd and Roberts 1987: 74) focus on the story structure rather than specific content. 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. The present researcher modified the story frame so that every missing key sentence or clause was replaced by a question word (see Appendix 2). Students had to answer the questions in the blank lines.

### Scoring
For the multiple-choice test, one mark was given for each correct answer. In the case of the story frame, a story frame including model answers for questions was

used as a guide in correcting the students' answers. The researcher and the teacher who taught the experimental group corrected the frames. Any disagreement was resolved through discussion until 100% agreement was reached.

## Pre-testing

Tests were administered in one session three days before the onset of instruction. First, students answered the multiple-choice questions. Then they were given the story frame test. The means for the two groups on both tests are presented in Table 1. A comparison of the pre-test means revealed no significant difference between the two groups, on the multiple-choice test: $t=1.2, p > .05$; on the story frame test: $t=1.1, p > .05$. This confirms that the two groups were essentially equivalent.

*Table 1:* Means and standard deviations for the pre-tests.

|      | Experimental Group (n=37) | | Control Group (n=33) | |
|------|------|------|------|------|
|      | M    | SD   | M    | SD   |
| MCT  | 4.3  | 1.3  | 4.7  | 1.5  |
| SFT  | 3.3  | 0.9  | 3    | 1    |

## Post-testing

This was conducted three days after instruction was completed. The same procedure was followed. Results are shown in Table 2.

*Table 2:* Means and standard deviations for the post-tests.

|      | Experimental Group | | Control Group | |
|------|------|------|------|------|
|      | M    | SD   | M    | SD   |
| MCT  | 15.4 | 1.7  | 12.6 | 2    |
| SFT  | 13.1 | 1.7  | 11.1 | 1.2  |

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 shows the post-test means for the two groups on both tests. A comparison of these means revealed significant differences between the experimental group and control group on both tests, on the multiple-choice test: $t=6.1, p < .01$; on the story frame test: $t=5.5, p < .01$. These results indicate that EFL students can be taught to comprehend text structure through direct instruction. In answer to the research question, story grammar and guided-reading questions that bring out the elements of the story structure seem to help EFL students abstract the episodic sequence and the metastructure of the story. In other words, students developed a mental representation of the story, i.e. a story schema, which helped them focus on main

ideas and remove unnecessary details. Story grammars may also be an effective way to develop an independent reading comprehension strategy which EFL students may use in reading stories outside the classroom. The findings also suggest support for training EFL teachers to provide instruction in story grammar.

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## APPENDIX 1
### Story Grammar for 'The Bottle Imp'

Episode 1 (chapter 1 and 2):

| | |
|---|---|
| *Characters:* | 1 – Keawe: a poor sailor.<br>2 – A rich old man. |
| *Setting:* | 1 – Place: San Francisco.<br>2 – Time: Sometime in the past. |
| *Problem:* | 1 – The rich old man had to sell the bottle imp before he died, otherwise he would burn.<br>2 – When the man sold the bottle, it must always be for less that he paid for it. |
| *Action:* | The old man convinced Keawe to buy the bottle imp. He told Keawe that the imp would make him rich. |
| *Resolution:* | Keawe bought the bottle imp. |

Episode 2 (chapter 3 and 4):

*Characters:*     1 – Keawe. 2 – Lopaka: Keawe's friend.
*Setting:*     Hawaii.
*Problem:*     1 – After he had become rich, Keawe wanted to sell the bottle imp to his friend Lopaka.
    2 – Lopaka wanted to see the imp before buying the bottle.
*Action:*     1 – Keawe asked the imp to come out of the bottle.
*Resolution:*     When Lopaka saw the imp he bought the bottle.

Episode 3 (chapter 5 and 6):

*Characters:*     1 – Keawe. 2 – Kokua (a girl). 3 – Kiano: the girl's father. 4 – A young man (who bought the bottle).
*Setting:*     Honolulu, Hawaii.
*Problem:*     1 – Keawe wanted to marry Kokua but he could not because he had leprosy.
    2 – Keawe must find the bottle so that the imp might cure him.
*Action:*     1 – Keawe sailed to Honolulu to look for the bottle.
    2 – Keawe found the man who had the bottle and bought it.
    3 – Keawe asked the imp to cure him.
*Resolution:*     Keawe went back to Hawaii and married Kokua.

Episode 4 (chapter 6, 7 and 8):

*Characters:*     1 – Keawe. 2 – Kokua. 3 – An old man.
*Setting:*     France.
*Problem:*     Keawe was unhappy because he had to sell the bottle for one cent. The man who would buy it could not sell it again because there was no smaller coin.
*Action:*     1 – Kokua told Keawe to go to France where there were smaller coins – centimes. Five centimes were the same as one cent.
    2 – Keawe and Kokua went to France.
    3 – Kokua asked an old man to buy the bottle from Keawe for four centimes. Then she would buy it from him for three centimes.
    4 – Kokua bought the bottle.
*Resolution:*     Keawe was happy but he did not know that Kokua bought the bottle.

Episode 5 (chapter 9 and 10):

*Characters:*     1 – Keawe. 2 – Kokua. 3 – A sailor.
*Setting:*     France.
*Problem:*     Keawe found out that Kokua had the bottle.

*Action:*          1 – Keawe asked a sailor to buy the bottle from his wife for two
                   centimes and then he would buy it from him for one centime.
                   2 – The sailor bought the bottle from Kokua.

*Resolution :*     The sailor did not sell the bottle to Keawe because he did not
                   believe Keawe. He thaought that Keawe was fooling him. This
                   was the last sale.

## APPENDIX 2

Keawe was a poor brave sailor. One day he sailed to San Francisco. There, he met
an old rich man. The man wanted to sell Keawe **What?** – – – – –. **Who?** – – – – –
lived in the bottle. The imp would do **What?** – – ––– . The man wanted to sell the
bottle **Why?** – – – – – . When a man sells the bottle, it must be for less than **What?**
– – – – – . Keawe bought the bottle. After he had become rich he sold the bottle for
**Whom?** – – – ––. Keawe went to Hawaii. There, he met a beautiful girl called
**What?** – – – – – . He wanted to marry her but he could not **Why?** – – – – – . So,
he wanted to buy the bottle again **Why?** – – – – – . Keawe looked for the bottle
until he found it. The imp cured him. Then, **What?** – – – – – . Now Keawe had to
sell the bottle again for one cent. But the man who would buy it could not sell it
again **Why?** – – – – – . Kokua told Keawe to go to France **Why?** – – – – – . Thus
Keawe and Kokua went to France. Kokua asked a man to buy the bottle from
Keawe for four centimes and then she would **What?** – – – – – . Later, Keawe found
out that his wife had the bottle. So he asked a sailor to buy the bottle from her for
two centimes and then he would **What?** –– – – . The sailor bought the bottle from
Kokua. But he did not sell the bottle to Keawe **Why?** – – – – – . This was the last
sale.