

Exemplification Of The Prodigal Son Narrative Structure In Enhancing Second Language Learners Reading Skills

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Abstract

The study focused on analyzing the narrative structure of the Prodigal Son parable in English language learning classroom to enhance the reading skills of tertiary level students. English Language Teaching through literature started to view as an authentic way of instruction in Second Language Learning. In this study learners were taught to comprehend the text by understanding the narrative structure of the parable. The instrument used in collecting the data was multiple choice text, composition test, and role play. Pre and post-test were administered to evaluate the result. The study provided insight for ELT practitioners to use parables in language teaching.

Keywords: ELT, ESL, learners, parable, reading comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an integral part in English language learning. Today many students are poor in reading because they are exhausted by their voluminous text books and baffled by their unenlightened practice towards their learning which makes them ignorant to understand the academic discourse properly. According to Bean (1996) Readers face ten types of difficulties in reading. Those difficulties are, readers misunderstand the process of reading, changing the reading strategy according to different purposes, difficulty in understanding the structure of the argument in the text, onerous to deduce the unfamiliar aspects in the text, unable to comprehend the rhetorical context, unable to communicate with the authors point, lack of cultural knowledge in deciphering the meaning of the text, insufficient vocabulary, feeling difficult to follow complex syntax, and not applying reading strategies according to the academic courses.

Readers should understand the meaning of the text. Teaching narrative text develops students reading strategy and makes them read the text appropriately. Stories grasp the attention of the reader and give personal touch. Stories are literary texts, it enable students to develop their interpretation skills. More than any other forms of learning stories have the ability to attract students' attention and enhance the learners' language skills.

ROLE OF NARRATIVE TEXT IN READING COMPREHENSION

Similarly Eagleton (1983) has observed that the "although we rarely notice it, we are all the time engaged in constructing hypotheses about the meaning of the text. The reader makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches; and to do this means drawing on a tacit knowledge of the world in general and of literary conventions in particular. The text itself is really no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language in to meaning" (p.76). Niles (1974) stated that "the text structure by sequencing and organizing the ideas view points by explaining a series of events in a certain time period. Some authors might arrange the information in a contrast/comparison pattern to explain the similarities and dissimilarities between two related segments".

Schema theory emphasizes that the structure of text and readers knowledge about the text structure have a considerable influence on reading activity. The text structure makes the reader remember the concept. "Adults and students recall less information after reading a disorganized passage than after reading a well-organized passage" (Thorndyke, 1997). Mc gee (1982) describes that "the readers who are not aware about the text structure cannot recall the information even though they are engaged with well-organized text structure passages. Students who do not recognize or use an author's text structure when reading recall fewer ideas from

a passage than students who do recognize and use the author's text". Therefore, it is significant for the readers to read well organized text structure to become successful in reading comprehension.

Narrative stories are best known components for reading comprehension. The story structure of the text is defined as "story grammar", researchers also coined certain other terms like 'story schema', 'story map', 'story frames', and other phrases to explain the same idea. It has been found that individuals with better knowledge of story grammar tend to be better at comprehending narrative text" (Fitzgerald, 1984; Mandler & Johnson, 1997). Story grammar theory is proposed by (Lakof 1972). Other general story grammar theory is generated by Van Dijk (1975), Thorndyke (1997), Mandler & Johnson (1977), Stein and Glean (1979). Among these Thorndyke's theory of story grammar emphasizes that the elements of story enhances comprehension skill of readers. Thorndyke's (1997) theory is defined in the following term "Story - Setting + Theme + Plot + Resolution." "The rule states that the story is composed of definite setting, a theme, a plot, and a resolution. The next rule signifies the setting - Characters + Location + Time." Setting consists of character, location specific place and time description. Next the theme is defined as "Theme - Event + Goal." Thorndyke's (1997) "the theme is the central point of the story; it specifies the central point of the story that is initiated by one or more events. The next norm is "plot - Episode, the plot consists of a series of episodes. Several studies on reading comprehension instruction through narrative text structure influenced student's critical reading skill". Fitzgerald and Spiegl (1983) provided comprehension instruction for the fourth graders through story grammar with direct instruction in the setting (who, where, when), the beginning of the story, the middle, the outcome, the end of the story. The main focus of instruction is to familiarize readers to use schema related questions such as "what is the role of main character? Students in the language classroom then practiced to use their knowledge of these schema related questions to comprehend story specific text in reading unfamiliar text and in composing their own narratives".

In Artificial Intelligence and Psychology, the best known research is on story schemata. Rumelhart (1975) says that "a story is comprised of a setting, an event, episode with certain reaction". He emphasized detailed structural knowledge is used by the reader to recognize key points in a story and there by facilitate summarization after the story has been read. Therefore, story schemata influences reading comprehension. In narrative comprehension Catherine Emmott (1997) emphasized "the text schemata knowledge plays a major role in reading comprehension. Knowledge about the specific character described in the text, how different characters relate to each other and, about which character live in a particular place, as well as a record of events that have occurred. When readers are engaged in character analyses, it makes them do inference". Emmott (1997) describes "the term 'contextual frame' is used to indicate the monitoring of a group of characters in a particular place at a specific time. This is important for narrative comprehension because an action within a context plays a significant role in understanding the appropriateness of content. The content of the story makes the reader maintain the sequential record of events that occurs in the story. Characters, content and, events, all of these types of knowledge are interlinked. Consequent development of the story gives entity. The representation of entity describes why certain actions occur; this makes the reader to maintain mental record of the events".

A number of other text specific factors also monitored by the reader. For example a reader is aware of from whose point of view the action is projected. This topic has been studied by narratologists and linguists (1990). They emphasized these related sequence of events propels the reader to find out, whether the situations described in the text is real or hypothetical. Werthmsapassim (1995), says that the text is written by the author with the status of certain intentions, conditionals and, beliefs etc. These notions invoke the readers' mental knowledge to comprehend the text in dynamic way than when information is depicted in a factual manner. The reader is supposed to retain an awareness of, on which character, current attention is focused. A reader must also concentrate on the wholeness of the story by keeping pace on the development of actions. It is necessary to seek out the various obstacles and struggles of the characters involved in the story. Many types of stories open wide horizons, for the reader to find solution for problems they encounter in real life. Researchers (Schank 1982; Lehnert 1981, Dyer 1983) have suggested that readers need to recognize the overall message of a text, theme or moral.

Cognitive Linguistic theory (1995) emphasized, “narrative text offers significant insights at word, phrase and sentence level. This theory also says that text analysis triggers the human capacity to build psychological representation of ‘worlds’, when the reader ventures in to the process of text analyses”. The work by Werth (1995) differentiates “‘discourse world’ and ‘real world’”. Discourse world is the immediate situational content shared by a speaker and listener. Text world is created in a reader’s mind from a text, this world is filled with characters and has its own spatio – temporal view point, through that the reader speculates the actual meaning of the text. The text is divided in to number of segments such as ‘spatial shift’, ‘temporal shift’ and, ‘character shift’. Sometimes the text may require the reader to jump in to the characters mind to experience their role, beliefs, conventions etc”.

Gerrig (1993) also discussed about the term ‘narrative world’. He says that the reader feels an immediate departure from their real life context to the narrative world. The reader’s involvement in reading goes beyond normal inference - making process. Reader’s excitement and suspense is kindled by the story narration. The quality of the story also makes the reader invoke ‘participatory responses’ which include the reader’s hopes, feelings, and fears, concerned with the characters in the story. Readers feel completely entangled with the emotions of the character and sometimes readers cry out deeply. When a character in the story encounters danger, readers start to hypothesize about possible escape routes for the main character, alternatively they also hope for the defilement of evil character. Such responses towards the text obviously make the reader to exist in different narrative worlds, postulated by the reader’s lack of empathy or sympathy towards the particular character based on their virtue and nature. The parable of Jesus is a narrative text with strong plot and theme and it nourishes readers’ critical thinking, critical reading and analysis skills.

The Prodigal Son Parable has a Beginning, A Middle and End

The Beginning

The parable begins with the younger son who urges his father to divide the property. The younger son wanted to pursue his inheritance. The beginning of the story reveals that the father has two sons. According to his younger son’s wish the father divides the property and gives the part of share to his younger son. The younger son takes his belongings and sets a journey towards a far country. This is the beginning of the story, the first part of the story. The beginning should capture the attention of the readers by giving insight to the topic, problem, or the stories’ theme. It sets the mood of the reader and provokes the interest of the reader. The beginning of the story makes the reader to speculate, whether the story will have happy ending or sad ending. A good beginning of the story triggers the reader’s interest to read further.

The Middle

The younger son has wasted the money by indulging in filthy activities with bad companions. He spends everything in “dissolute living” he is desolated by his friends when he runs out of money. He desperately loitered around the city finally he is forced to work as a swineherd feeding pigs. He longs and envies to be feed with the pods that the pigs eat but he doesn’t get anything to eat. The second part of the story rests in the middle of the story. The middle part gives a turning point to the story. It makes the reader to speculate how the story is going to end. The middle part should have a reversal in the action; it should give insight to the plot. The progression of event in the middle triggers the climax of the story.

The End

The younger son repents for his sin and decided to leave for his father’s home. He is fearful and full of guilt. He is obscured and haunted by various thoughts, he is asphyxiated that he will be chastised away by his father but when he returns home the father welcomes his son without blame or shame, entreats him with a feast by ordering his servants to kill a fattened calf. The son tries to explain his sorrows and guilt but the father is overwhelmed with jocund pleasure about his son’s resurrection from filthy life. The father also orders the servant to attire his son with a best robe and celebrates the younger lad return. The younger lad is totally immersed in his father’s affection and the younger son becomes speechless. The younger lad is completely enthralled by his father’s placidity of warmth and divine love towards him. At this time the elder son comes back to home, he disputes with his father when he witnessed the celebration of his brother’s return from sinful life. The father consoles his child by saying “son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found”

(Luke 15:31-32), thus the story ends by resolving the complication. The end of a story should present the climax scene. The end gives closure to the story. The end of the story gives solution to the problem. This parable has open ending it is not clear whether the elder son is convinced by his father's words. It is left to the interpretation of the readers. A story with good ending makes the reader to think about, long after it is finished.

The Parable of *the Prodigal Son* in Language Learning

The parable has two parts. The first half of the story portrays and revolves around the younger son. The second half of the story deals with the elder son. The first part gives a complete unity, yet the second part is essential to conclude the story with consequent development. This parable is noted for its unity, the father is the unifying character, who is noted for his compassionate love towards his both sons (Bailey 1991). When the prodigal son returns, the father noticed his son far from the distance, he runs towards the son showered his affection and exhibited his desperation by embracing and kissing his son (Luke 15:20). He also orders his servants to kill the fattened calf to rejoice the pleasure of his son's return with merriment. The father also invites the elder son to participate in the pleasure of his brother's return from sinful life. Thus the father welcomes back his son who was dead but is alive again, was lost but has been found (Luke 15:24, 32, NIV).

The parable is also noted for its coherence which has been evident in the opening line of the prodigal son parable "There was a man who had two sons" (Luke 15:11). The inner coherence of the story is revealed in the sequence of two successive parts (Luke 15: 11-24 and 25-32). Both the parts of the story are important for the sequential progression of the story. Thus first part cannot function without the second part. The characters are given equal attention and importance in the story. "The three characters depicted in the story: the father, the younger son and, the elder son noted for their consistent portrayal and depiction in the parable" (Scott, 1989).

The predominant occurrence of the same phrases and clauses has been recurrent in the parable of '*The Prodigal Son*'. The younger son suffers a lot after squandering his inheritance. He has been hired by a Gentile to feed his swineherd. The younger son repents for his sin at this turmoil; he realizes his mistake and decides to leave for his father's home. In soliloquy he frames his thoughts as to how he is going to address his father "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your hired servant" (Luke 15:18-19). When he returns back, he uttered the same words which he formulated in his mind with the exception of the clause "Make me like one of your hired men" he does not recite the remaining words when he witnessed his father's love and compassion (Nolland, 1993). The younger son becomes speechless when his father embraced and kissed him. The father also says "Kill the fattened calf, dead and is alive again and lost and is found" these phrases are recurrent it appear at the first part end and again at the end of second part. The symmetry in this parable is profound as it is apparent in the inverted sequence of *The Prodigal Son*, who leaves his father, squanders his property in reckless living; he has been rejected, repents for his sin and finally accepted by his father as his son, his life has been restored.

The Implicit Meaning of the Parable the *Prodigal Son*

It is intended for the Pharisees. They are members of the ancient Jewish sect. They strictly followed the traditional law. They pretended as self-righteous people but they are hypocrites. The context of the parable revolves around the preaching of Jesus. His didactic teaching attracted a large crowd of people. "All the tax collectors and the sinners are drawn towards him and listened to his words". The Pharisees grumbled against Jesus by saying "This man eats and drinks with sinners and tax collectors." Therefore Jesus started to elucidate this parable against the Pharisees who boasted of themselves as righteous beings just because they observed the law diligently, they treated the sinners very badly and oppressed them.

The parable is rich in its cultural meaning. The setting of the parable involves a crowd of people. It says number of tax collectors, sinners, and various other Jewish sects are drawn towards the preaching of Jesus. The tax collectors are Jews, they collected taxes from their countrymen, and they worked under the Roman government. Very often they charged more tax from the people than the actual required proportion of tax. For this reason they are regarded as traitors and they are out casted from the Jewish society. The term 'sinners' in the Jewish society does not only applicable for person's who indulged in robbery and other atrocities in the

society. The term is also used to refer people, who followed lower occupation in the society. The Pharisees considered these low occupation holders in the society as sinners and oppressed them. The Pharisees ill-treated and underestimated these lower occupation people because the Pharisees considered the people's profession as inferior, filthy, and not compatible with the Jewish law and society. Thus the Pharisees constructed the rules and categorized various group of people in the society as sinners. For example the tanners and shepherds are segregated and treated as sinners because the Pharisees associated their profession with dishonesty, therefore a Jew is not supposed to have any contact with such people in the society. When Jesus preached throughout the country, everybody is attracted to his words. The tax collectors and sinners are not an exception; they are very much interested and followed Jesus to listen to his supreme words that is why the Pharisees grumbled against Jesus association with socially outcast people like tax collectors and sinners. Jesus knows about the hypocrite nature of Pharisees and Jesus completely disregarded the Pharisees.

Verses 11-12 are noted for intense cultural meaning. In the Middle East culture, the legacy of inheritance is obtained by the son of the family, only after the death of the father. It is highly unorthodox in a Jewish society to divide the property, when the father is alive. When the younger son comes to his father to get hold of his inheritance, he is behaving in an unconventional way and it is a great disgrace for his father's existence. The meaning of the younger son's discourse in seeking for inheritance, when the father is alive, it is like the son is saying "Father I wish you were dead". When the Jewish leaders paid attention towards "The Prodigal Son" parable, they would not have expected the return of the profligate lad back in to the family. In fact they speculated that the prodigal son would have been disowned, stoned out of the country, and out casted by the society, according to the Jewish norm and convention. The unexpected turn and twist in the parable is the fathers extended love and forgiveness towards his younger son. It makes the story worth emphasizing. Thus the parable study paves way for the students to analyze the text in sociolinguistic point of view.

The second son character exemplifies sinners, the elder son character represents the Pharisees, and the father character represents the God Almighty. Through these characters the author projected his main vision. According to Christian belief and ideology, Jesus the son of God came to this world for redemption. The mission of Jesus is to resurrect people from sinful life and to offer salvation. Jesus stressed the ideology of eternity through this parable. He says "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents". When the prodigal son repents for his sin he is accepted and received by his father with great joy and pleasure. Thus the father character symbolizes God.

The eldest son denotes the Jewish leaders. The religious leaders look out for their rewards due for their works likewise the elder son in the story is just concerned with his rewards from his father. The elder brother is not happy with his younger brother's return to home. The first son confronts with his dad's joy and celebration towards the prodigal son's return from reckless living. Similar to the elder son's character the Jewish leaders also grumbles against the association of Jesus with socially out cast people, Jesus showed his disregard for the Pharisees illicit nature through this parable. Thus the parables make the reader think critically to sort out the implicit hidden meaning of the text through reading strategies.

Reading comprehension encompasses critical reading skill. Critical reading postulates critical thinking, where the readers can obtain the ability to critique the logic of the text that is deeply enshrined within the implicit meaning of the author's idea that is usually encrypted by inconsistent description of the author. The job of the critical reader is to throw light on the logic of the text by paying attention to the inconsistencies and lack of clarity in the text portion, where the author's ideology is unfolded. Critical readers have the ability to attend the wider implications of specific text that is projected through the dominant discourse pattern of the text in which the author's central point of view is uncovered. Eagleton offered certain definitions of ideology. He says "Ideology is a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class" "systematically distorted communication"

His description about ideology is quite applicable for the parables of Jesus. For example readers cannot understand the central point of The Prodigal Son parable without analyzing text in socio cultural point of view. The critical reading pedagogy is based on the critique of culturally varying degrees of discourse pattern. "In sociolinguistic, schema learning theory, and cultivation theory recognized that culture plays prominent role in second language learning, success in language learning is conditional upon the acquisition of cultural

knowledge. Language learners acquire cultural background knowledge in order to communicate and to increase their comprehension in target language” (Strasheim, 1997).

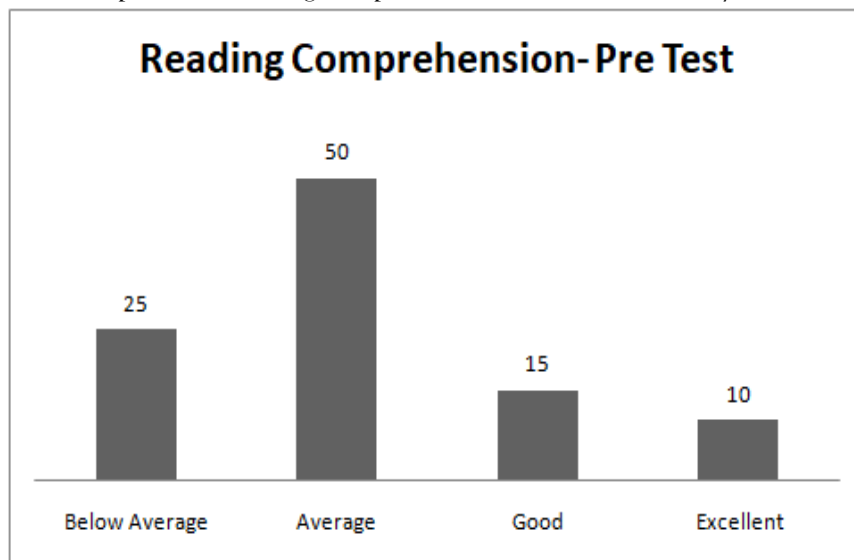
Eagleton’s (1983) second definition is similar to Habermas’s (1984) definition about ideology. He notes “ideology is a form of communication systematically distorted by power”. The distortion in language is used by the author to project his norm of undistorted communication. The critical thinking skill enables the reader to find out the undistorted communication of the author that is locus in the idealized concept of indistinct language form. The facilitator enhanced students’ critical reading skill, critical thinking skill, and language skills by deploying the narrative structure of parables in language learning (Eagleton, 1983; Habermas, 1970; Strasheim, 1997).

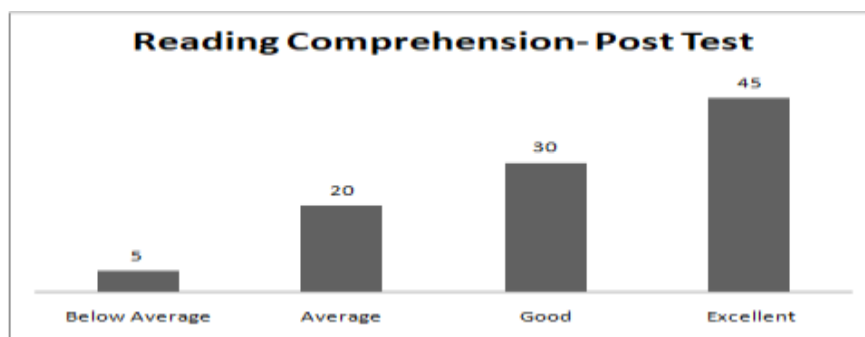
METHOD

Engineering students from first year are selected for this class room teaching. Sixty students have been taught to analyze the narrative text. Experimental research is carried to examine the strength of association between the variables. The term variable is defined as something that is not constant and pertained to change. The researcher carried out pre-experiment. It has pre-test and post-test. Result is evaluated according to the test scores. At initial stage lecture method is followed and three phases of reading such as: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading validated. In pre-test students comprehension level is evaluated through multiple choice tests. After learning about the narrative structure of the text students are evaluated through composition, multiple choice tests, and role play to analyze their reading comprehension skills in post-test.

Analysis

The data obtained for this research is in numerical form, therefore the summarization and analyses is presented in the form of graph and figures. The graph or figure representation makes it understandable for the reader to figure out the result. After learning to analyze the text through narrative strategy students performed well and developed their reading comprehension skills tremendously.





CONCLUSION

In ESL, learners can study parables as literature. Parables take the readers' to different level and the message conveyed through it, touch the readers at deeper level that provides an impact on language learning. Students are taught to analyze the narrative text structure through the demonstration of the Prodigal Son parable. It makes learners understand the impact of strategies in reading. Students have learnt to employ different reading strategies while reading a text. Thus, this study has proved the usefulness of narrative text in improving students reading understanding skills.

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