
*Raising awareness of 'top-down'
processing strategies for reading short
stories with low-level learners*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sharing and enjoying stories is a tradition that has been with humanity since we could first communicate. Regardless of your background, well-told and written narratives connect us to one another. Therefore, for the language teacher short stories are a valuable asset. With them we have numerous tools for achieving one of our primary goals, reinforcing of skills.

Along with our intrinsic fondness for story telling, short stories in particular, often carry a motivational benefit embedded into them (Erkaya, 2005). This is one reason why learners are attracted to short stories. Another is that within the stories there are new cultural ideas, perceptions, different values and beliefs. Two other benefits of using short stories are:

1. they are “authentic text, real language in context, to which we can respond directly” (Brumfit and Carter, 1986:15)
2. they contain real examples of grammatical structures and vocabulary items that raise learners’ awareness of target language in use (Povey, 1967). This subsequently develops learners’ proficiency in the four language skills.

This essay will explain how rising awareness of ‘top-down’ processing can help low-learners better appreciate the genre of short stories and help better develop their reading comprehension skills, creating a more enjoyable language learning experience.

2. ANALYSIS

‘Top-down’ processing of a text happens when readers bring their own background information to predict the meaning of language they will encounter in a text (BBC). They start with a general knowledge of the theme and develop expectations of what they will read. Then as they read they confirm or reject those expectations, moving from a general overview to details (Scrivener 2005:187).

2.1 Activating Background Knowledge

Before engaging with a short story, good readers activate their schemata to help them comprehend the text. A schema is a “cognitive constructs which allow for the organization of information in long-term memory (Widdowson, 1983). When stimulated, the mind activates a schema (Cook, 1989). They help us relate incoming information to information we already know. Two schemas worth mentioning with short stories are content (background knowledge) schema and formal (textual) schema.

Content (background knowledge) schema is the world knowledge, experience and background understanding readers bring to the text. It provides a basis for comparison. As new information is taken in, this schema will be reinforced, reformulate or rejected. (Richardson 2007:100).

Formal (textual) schema is the knowledge of the form of organization and the rhetorical structures of a text. Short stories are brief, often fictional prose narratives that deal usually with one significant incident in a limited setting with one or few characters. They are

characteristic of their use of plot in the dramatic structure of exposition, crisis, climax, and resolution. Often, they are accompanied with illustrations and/or a moral or motivational message.

Activating Background knowledge is important. As put forth by Goodman (1996) and Smith (1986), using this background knowledge readers comprehend text by going through the continuous process of taking input text, processing it, predicting what will come next, testing and confirming predictions, and so on.

2.2 Gist Reading

The gist of a text is the main idea or sense of a text. Reading for gist is done quickly and is called skimming. (BBC) This reading sub-skill is used to quickly recognize and discuss key events in a story. Irwin and Baker (1989) said skilled readers are able to select useful information they can use to comprehend the passage. These readers are also able to ignore information that is not important. Another closely related reading sub-skill is scanning, which is quick reading done to look for specific information. While overall comprehension may be reduced, these skills are effective for finding relevant and necessary information quickly.

With a short story these skills are useful if a reader needs to give a summary as a report or maybe wants to retell the story to a friend. If there is an exam for short stories in a literature class, the reader can skim and scan to efficiently find information that has not been studied yet, or that needs to be mastered. Also, if reader feels the writer is being longwinded, s/he can skim the remaining paragraph to understand the gist and see if any new main ideas are presented.

2.3 Predicting

Predicting is a strategy that also involves the readers' background knowledge. However, it's not just a pre-reading strategy. Good readers use it before and during the reading task, and checking their predictions when the task is finished. A prediction is an *"educated guesses about what will happen next based on what is known from reading the text"* (Morillonio, 2007: 76). In Transactional Theory Rosenblatt (1978) says reading is a transaction between the reader, the text and the author's intentions. Good short story writers are aware of the transaction and the reader's background knowledge, so they place clues in the story. Readers predict based on these clues and are actively engaged throughout the reading process with the writer, so the text is more meaningful.

For example in the story of the "Three Little Pigs" (Appendix A), after the first pig's house is blown over, a good reader would predict what may happen to the second and third, and confirm if the prediction was true in the end.

3. ISSUES

3.1 Activating Background Knowledge

3.1.1

An issue can arise if readers encounter a text with no schema for that particular topic. They start with an immediate loss of comprehension. Here is a personal example I had with my low-level Arab students. The lesson theme was commuting and the foot traffic flow in Manhattan, New York City. The book described busy urban streets and the buzzing activity of the metropolitan city with Central Park in the middle.

The concept of having such heavy foot traffic in public areas was lost on my students. And although few had seen Central Park on television or movies, the closest concept they had was a few mid size, arid garden in their small town. Whereas the text described a throng of people making their way down the crowded sidewalk, they were from small villages whose entire population could not compare to even a small New York neighborhood. Activating schemata was difficult as there were little or no schemata to work with and the readers became disinterested from the outset. Morillonio (2007) forewarns that educators should not “assume that students have prior experience with any school-based domain.”

3.1.2

Another issues can be often miscomprehension in L2 happens because of two different cultural understandings of one particular idea. In the reading process, the reader and the author bring his/her own background knowledge with assumptions about the other. As Carrell and Eisterhold (1983:80) stated, "one of the most obvious reasons why a particular content schema may fail to exist for a reader is that the schema is culturally specific and is not part of a particular reader's cultural background."

While teaching pre-intermediates in South Korea, I presented a lesson about phrasal verbs in the context of romantic relationships, however some concepts were not fully comprehended because of the difference between the intentions of the author and the background view of the readers. Similarly in Saudi Arabia, a course book presented the idea of a woman driver in Formula 1, whereas the students could not get beyond the concept of a woman driving.

3.2 Gist Reading

3.2.1

Gist reading and skimming are sub skills that good readers use to read efficiently. However, if they are not coupled with more intensive reading, they are characteristic of a poor reader (Thornbury). Unfortunately, some teachers do not teach the rational behind gist reading to low-level learners, and readers and teachers are misguided to think they reading.

3.2.2

Another issue with gist reading is that some readers are not even aware of skimming and how to use it. Nagao said in Japan intensive reading for detailed comprehension is the only way they have been trained to read (Nagao 2003:6).

3.3 Predicting

Specifically for lower level students regarding predicting, they may have the schemata however they are lacking the linguistic skills to discuss this background knowledge in L2. That is to say, "schema has been activated but learning the L2 has not been facilitated" (Aebersold and Field 1997:77).

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

4.1 Activating Background Knowledge

4.1.1

To address issues 3.1.1, it may sound obvious, but your goal is to motivate and arouse interest in the readers, so choose short stories that are sensitive to readers' needs, interests, and cultural. If we can assume that the reader and the writer have close matching schemata, we can expect fewer comprehension difficulties. (Wallace 1992:34-35)

With short stories, you may arouse more interest if readers chose their own stories. When presenting this option to a group of pre-teen learners in South Korea, they showed great enthusiasm and we even extended the activity into presentations.

4.1.2

To address issue 3.1.2, Stott (2011) presented a point for teachers to take the time and verify the usefulness of an activity, and pay attention to possible schema-interferences or non-activation. Where there is a culturally specific reason schema is lacking, it may be beneficial to provide a local text or a text that came from the reader's own experience. (Carrell and Eisterhold 1983:85)

I strongly agree with Stott. I have had positive experiences in Saudi Arabia with my learners by presenting culturally specific material they could easily identify with, such as their celebrations of Eid (See Appendix B). It is worth noting, when using learners' culture as context, it is important the teacher approaches with discretion. However I have found if learners see you are sincere and truly intrigued, this encourages them to engage with the reading and class.

Gist Reading

4.2.1

To address issue 3.2.1 teachers must understand that gist reading, skimming and scanning are only sub-skills of reading and not the entirety of reading. For low-level learners if they are unable to manage the text, use graded text or pre-teach the necessary vocabulary. Although this isn't completely reading either, rather readers are just transferring skills from L1 to L2. However, this does make the text manageable for the readers so it can fully be exploited.

4.2.2

To address issue 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, you need to teach readers *the reason* to gist read (to use time wisely), and *how* to gist read. This is outlined in the procedure below:

Before they start reading, do the following:

- give readers 2 or 3 general questions to check their overall comprehension. Make sure they are not detail questions (See Appendix C).
- give them a specific time limit, so they know it must be read quickly without stopping to check detail
- give instructions first, then the text ONLY when they have to read it, otherwise they will start to read it while you are talking to them
- some ways to check comprehension are by:
 - readers drawing illustrations of the story
 - sorting pictures provided by teacher in the correct order
 - choosing an appropriate title or their own
 - choosing the correct summary

(adapted from Kukulski, English is a Piece of Cake)

Kukulski's methods are reasonable, however, if this is the first time readers are coming across the concept of gist reading, I would model it on the board first, letting them know I will be thinking out loud to share how I manage the text. During that time I would pay attention to headings, subheadings and keywords. Again, all while speaking out loud.

Predicting

4.3.1

To address 3.3, teach the vocabulary readers will need to complete the task, but be mindful to only teach unnecessary vocabulary and not too many items. If you find you have too many items, you may need to reconsider your text.

4.3.2

To help explore the vocabulary and activate schemata for a short story, I have used videos on YouTube. Many short stories have short videos easily found on YouTube. First, watch a short clip of the video, not revealing too much. Then, have students board the words for what they saw and heard in the video. View the words with the readers, and see if there are any words they want to say, but may not know. Here they will have their vocabulary to help with their prediction task. Afterwards, using the words on the board, ask them to predict in pairs what they think will happen in the story.

I especially like this predictive task that activates schemata before the actual task, and creates a word bank the learner created themselves. Also, this method caters to audio and visual learners who otherwise may not be as interested in the text.

Also, make sure to always check the predictive task to fully exploit the text and make sure the reader knows the task are meaningful and for a reason and not just busy work.

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Appendix A

The Three Little Pigs

Once upon a time there were three little pigs. One pig built a house of straw while the second pig built his house with sticks. They built their houses very quickly and then sang and danced all day because they were lazy. The third little pig worked hard all day and built his house with bricks.

A big bad wolf saw the two little pigs while they danced and played and thought, "What juicy tender meals they will make!" He chased the two pigs and they ran and hid in their houses. The big bad wolf went to the first house and huffed and puffed and blew the house down in minutes. The frightened little pig ran to the second pig's house that was made of sticks. The big bad wolf now came to this house and huffed and puffed and blew the house down in hardly any time. Now, the two little pigs were terrified and ran to the third pig's house that was made of bricks.

The big bad wolf tried to huff and puff and blow the house down, but he could not. He kept trying for hours but the house was very strong and the little pigs were safe inside. He tried to enter through the chimney but the third little pig boiled a big pot of water and kept it below the chimney. The wolf fell into it and died.

The two little pigs now felt sorry for having been so lazy. They too built their houses with bricks and lived happily ever after.

Appendix B

Eid Cloze

WORDLIST:

Nouns	Adjectives	Verb	Other Words
Eid, Muslims, Ramadan, people	other	celebrated, celebrates, pray, visits, tell, ask	a, and, When, who, also

Eid al-Adha is a religious festival ¹ _____ by Muslims all over the world. ² _____ sacrifice a goat, sheep, cow or ³ _____ camel. They send it to poor ⁴ _____ as a donation. Eid al-Adha ⁵ _____ the end of Hajj for Muslims ⁶ _____ travel to Mecca each year and ⁷ _____ 5 times of the day. They ⁸ _____ Allah what they are thinking and ⁹ _____ for him to help them. They ¹⁰ _____ remember Ibrahim and Ishmael's being brave ¹¹ _____ worship to God.

Eid ul-Fitr is ¹² _____ Muslim holiday celebrated when Ramadan ends. ¹³ _____ do not fast on Eid ul-Fitr-. ¹⁴ _____ there is the new moon after ¹⁵ _____, the next day is Eid ul-Fitr-. ¹⁶ _____ ul-Fitr is for three days. ¹⁷ _____ this time, children knock on doors ¹⁸ _____ take chocolate, money, sugar from the ¹⁹ _____ people. Children kiss adults' hands. Everyone ²⁰ _____ each other. People forgive each other ²¹ _____ families meet together.

Eid al-Adha is a religious festival celebrated by Muslims all over the world. Muslims sacrifice a goat, sheep, cow or a camel. They send it to poor people as a donation. Eid al-Adha celebrates the end of Hajj for Muslims who travel to Mecca each year and pray 5 times of the day. They tell Allah what they are thinking and ask for him to help them. They also remember Ibrahim and Ishmael's being brave and worship to God.

Eid ul-Fitr is a Muslim holiday celebrated when Ramadan ends. Muslims do not fast on Eid ul-Fitr. When there is the new moon after Ramadan, the next day is Eid ul-Fitr. Eid ul-Fitr is for three days. During this time, children knock on doors and take chocolate, money, sugar from the other people. Children kiss adults' hands. Everyone visits each other. People forgive each other and families meet together.

UNDERSTANDING THE MAIN IDEA

Circle the letter of the best answer.

1. "Puppy Love" is about
 - a. two islands in Japan.
 - b. a Japanese holiday.
 - c. a dog who visits his girlfriend.
2. People were amazed when they heard about Shiro because
 - a. dogs don't usually fall in love.
 - b. swimming from Aka to Zamami is very difficult.
 - c. "Shiro" is an unusual name for a dog.

Taken from *More True Stories: A High—Beginning Reader*. Page 4.

Heyer, Sandra. *More True Stories: A High--Beginning Reader*. White Plains, NY: Longman, 1997. Print.

Above are questions to check comprehension of the main idea or gist.

The story is below.

Puppy Love

"SHIRO! Shiro!"
Mr. and Mrs. Nakamura were worried. Their dog Shiro was missing. "Shiro!" They called again and again. Mr. and Mrs. Nakamura lived on a small island in Japan. They looked everywhere on the island, but they didn't find Shiro.

The next day Mr. Nakamura heard a noise at the front door. He opened the door, and there was Shiro. Shiro was very wet, and he was shivering.

A few days later Shiro disappeared again. He disappeared in the morning, and he came back late at night. When he came back, he was wet and shivering.

Shiro began to disappear often. He always disappeared in the morning and came back late at night. He was always wet when he came back.

Mr. Nakamura was curious. "Where does Shiro go?" he wondered. "Why is he wet when he comes back?"

One morning Mr. Nakamura followed Shiro. Shiro walked to the beach. He ran into the water and began to swim. Mr. Nakamura jumped into his boat and followed his dog. Shiro swam for about two miles.¹ Then he was tired, so he climbed onto a rock and rested. A few minutes later he jumped back into the water and continued swimming.

Shiro swam for three hours. Then he arrived at

an island. He walked onto the beach, shook water off, and walked toward town. Mr. Nakamura followed him. Shiro walked to a house. A dog was waiting in front of the house. Shiro ran to the dog and the two dogs began to play. The dog's name was Marilyn. Marilyn was Shiro's girlfriend.

Marilyn lived on Zamami, another Japanese island. Shiro and the Nakamuras used to live on Aka. Then, in the summer of 1986, they moved to Zamami. Shiro missed Marilyn very much and wanted to be with her. But Shiro was too far away to be with the Nakamuras, too. So, Shiro lived on Aka and visited the Nakamuras on the island of Aka and swam to Zamami to visit Marilyn.

People were amazed when they heard about Shiro. The distance from Aka to Zamami is about 13.2 miles.² The ocean between the islands is very rough. "Nobody can swim from Aka to Zamami!" the people said.

Shiro became famous. Many people visited Zamami because they wanted to see Shiro. During one Japanese holiday, 3,000 people visited Zamami. They waited on the beach for Shiro. "Maybe Shiro will swim to Zamami today," they said. They wanted to see Shiro, the dog who was in love with Marilyn.

¹3.2 kilometers
²4 kilometers