Story Grammar Application in ESL Reading

by Joselito W. Lalas

In ESL reading comprehension, one of the areas of interest that has attracted attention recently is the notion of story grammar. Story grammar represents the internal structure of stories and the relationships among the parts. It consists of a set of rules governing the types of story information that occur and the types of interrelationships that connect the different story components. This notion is based on the premise of schema theory which takes into consideration what a reader brings to reading and how a piece of text is written (Rumelhart 1977, Meyer 1981).

In schema theory, a distinction is made between *formal* schemata and *content* schemata (Carrell 1983). Formal schemata include the rhetorical and organizational structures of stories and expository texts. Content schemata consist of the reader's "background knowledge about the content area of a text" (Carrell 1983:6). Content schemata must be considered in relation to particular text topics, which for example, may range from celebrating fiestas in Latin America to making bamboo flutes, from the U.S. bases in the Philippines to the history of Nigeria.

Story grammar can be classified as a type of formal schemata. Recent studies (Singer & Donlan 1982, Whaley 1981) have demonstrated that instruction in story grammar can help students improve their comprehension of complex short stories.

Story Grammar Categories

Several investigators have formulated rules for a simple story grammar. The most frequently mentioned grammars (Thorndyke 1977, Stein and Glenn 1975, Mandler and Johnson 1977) will be described briefly in this paper. The following is a sample story taken from Stein (1978) parsed into story grammar representations by Mandler and Johnson (1977) and Stein and Glenn (1975). Note the basic similarities between Mandler and Johnson's and Stein and Glenn's grammars:

Story	*M & J*	*S & G*
1. Once there was a big gray fish named Albert.	Setting	Setting
2. He lived in a big icy pond near the edge of the forest.		
3. One day, Albert was swimming around the pond.	Beginning	Initiating Event
4. Then he spotted a big juicy worm on top of the water.		
5. Albert knew how delicious worms tasted.	Reaction	Internal Response
6. He wanted to eat that one for his dinner.		
7. So he swam very close to the worm.	Attempt	Attempt
8. Then he bit into him.		
9. Suddenly, Albert was pulled through the water into a boat.	Outcome	Consequence
10. He had been caught by a fisherman.		
11. Albert felt sad.	Ending	Reaction
12. He wished he had been more careful.		

The *setting* introduces the protagonist and the physical, social, or temporal context of the story. The *initiating event (beginning)* describes an action which causes the character to demonstrate a certain response. The *internal response (reaction)* indicates an emotional response and the thoughts of the protagonist to achieve a certain goal. The *attempt* includes all overt actions to attain the goal of the protagonist. The *consequence (outcome)* includes the character's final actions and results which mark attainment or nonattainment of the goals of the protagonist. The *reaction (ending)* expresses the character's feelings and thoughts about the goal attainment effort and indicates the response of the character to the consequence.

On the other hand, Guthrie (1977:575) differentiates and summarizes a simple story grammar by Thorndyke this way:

> The first rule simply defines a story as consisting of a setting, theme, plot, and a resolution, which usually occur in that sequence. The second rule is that the setting consists of the characters and usually the location and time of a story. The third rule is that the theme of a story consists of the main goal of the main character . . . . The plot consists of a series of episodes, which are designed to help the main character reach the goal. Each episode consists of a subgoal, and a resolution of the attempt . . . . After several episodes, an outcome occurs which matches the goal of the main character, ushering in a final resolution. These rules apply to many stories, folktales and dramas, and give us a common framework for understanding them.

Figure one illustrates this story structure.

Classroom Implications

The following are story grammar strategies that can be used to improve reading comprehension:

1. Use story grammar in the design of comprehension questions. Such questions enhance learning by directing the reader's attention to relevant and related information needed to answer them. Questions that are based on story grammar categories (setting, beginning, reaction, attempt, outcome, ending) elicit responses that require both literal and inferential levels of thinking. These questions allow students to understand the various types of information that make a story coherent and, therefore, may help them develop knowledge of story structure. The following are six generic questions derived from Mandler and Johnson's grammar:

1. Where and when did the story event/events happen and who was/were involved in them? (Setting)
2. What action or event caused the character to demonstrate a certain response? (Beginning)
3. What was the emotional response and thought of the character to this action or event? (Reaction)

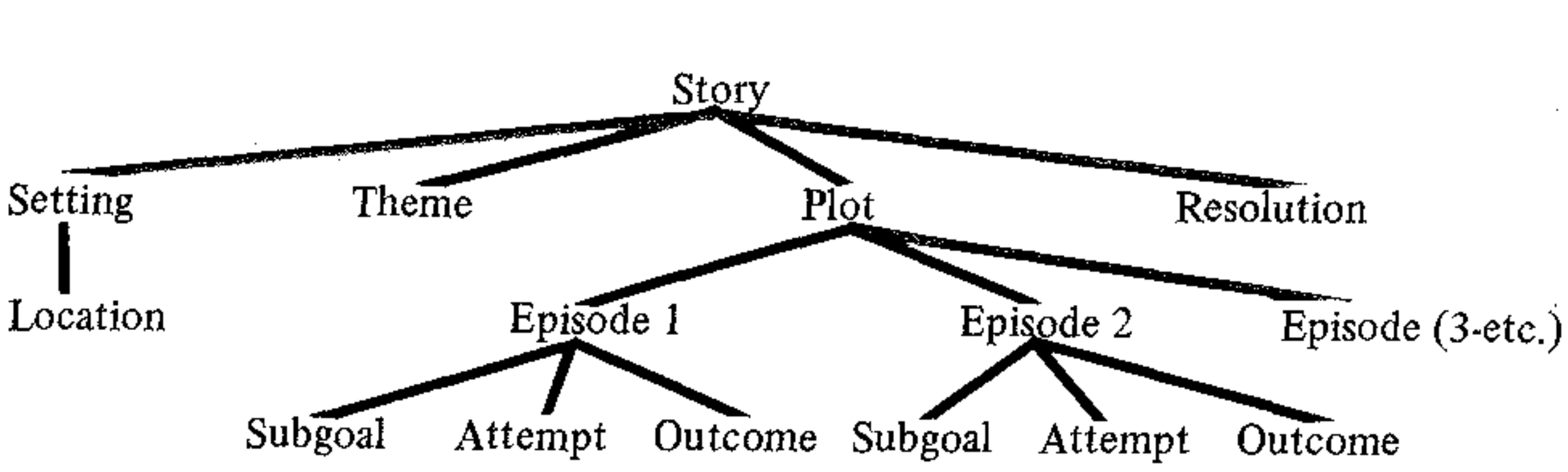

FIGURE 1

Thorndyke's Story Grammar

4. What overt actions did the character demonstrate? (Attempt)
5. What happened as a result of the overt actions demonstrated by the character? Was the goal attained? (Outcome)
6. What was the character's feelings and thoughts about the goal attainment effort? (Ending)

Using the story of "Albert" as an example, the teacher can ask students to answer the following questions: When and where did the story about Albert happen (setting)? What was Albert doing one day and what did he see (beginning)? What did Albert think of the worms and what did he want to do (reaction)? What did Albert do (attempt)? What happened to Albert (outcome)? How did Albert feel at the end (ending)? Answers to these specific questions identify the story propositions (statements) in each story category.

2. Use story grammar in reading comprehension instructions. Cunningham and Foster (1978) deduced some strategies for teaching story grammar and claimed to have been very successful in increasing students' comprehension. Using a simplified diagram of Thorndyke's story grammar, students were asked to complete it by writing the location, time, characters, goal, subgoal, attempt, and outcome and resolution.

3. Use story grammar in writing short stories. The story structure provides the framework for ESL students to create simple stories. For example, students can be asked to supply the ideas or propositions for each of the story grammar categories. This can lead the students to write their own simple stories. The following are examples of one-episode stories written using the Mandler and Johnson story grammar:

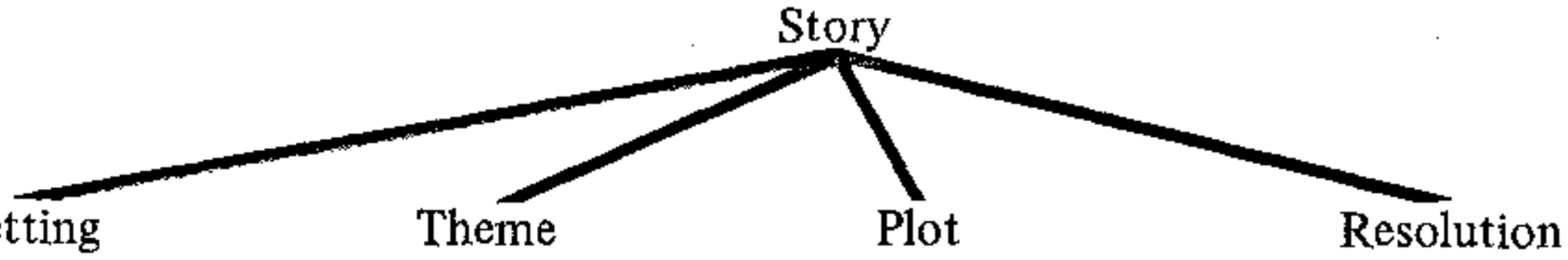

FIGURE 2

Simplified Diagram of Thorndyke's Story Grammar
(taken from Cunningham & Foster, 1978)

STORY I

Once upon a time, Chun and Chin and their mother Mei Lam, were standing by the river in a small mountain village in Southern China. It was the fall of the year and the mother and daughters were dressed in their rich clothes. They were walking when they saw a water buffalo. The two daughters laughed at the water buffalo and called it an ugly beast. "Look how beautiful we are in our noble clothes," they said. Suddenly, the mother climbed on the buffalo's back. The buffalo began to talk to the mother. "Thank you, for sitting on my back gracious lady." "Not at all. I remember our last encounter." Mei Lam told her surprised daughters that when she was a young girl she fell into the river. This water buffalo swam over and saved her. "So daughters, do not judge nobility by appearance." The daughters were ashamed and bowed their heads and cried.

STORY II

Billy had been out skateboarding. His mother warned him not to go down Beacon Street because it was too dangerous. Billy headed for Beacon Street anyway, remembering how great the wind felt blowing through his hair. He jumped on his skateboard and took off. Just as he turned the last corner, he discovered men working on the sidewalk. It was too late to stop and he crashed through the barricades. Later in the bathroom, Billy's sister Barbara helped mend his knee. Barbara said, "You shouldn't have been on Beacon Street. Wait until Mom finds out."

STORY III

One day Tom and his friends were riding to school on the school bus. Tom had his horn with him for his music lesson. He started to play a song. Tom's friends didn't like the song. One girl tried to take his horn away from him. The horn hit the window next to Tom. It broke the window. That night the bus driver called Tom's mother. She was very upset. Tom was sorry. He promised not to play his horn on the bus again.

Conclusions

Through story grammar it is also possible to evaluate the ESL students' knowledge of story categories and their overall comprehension of a story. Story grammar studies imply that what is essential in story comprehension is the reader's experiences with story discourse and internalization of the story parts. The use of story grammar in designing comprehension questions, reading strategies, and creating short stories illustrates its potential as a means of developing ESL learners' reading comprehension.

Joselito W. Lalas is a reading/ESL specialist at the Bilingual Education Service Center for Alaska and the Northwest, University of Washington. He provides workshops for teachers and aides in the areas of second language acquisition, ESL reading, materials selection and adaptation, and ESL curriculum development. He holds M.Ed. and Ed.S. degrees in reading/language arts from Seattle Pacific University. Currently, he is working on his doctoral degree in reading/language arts at the University of Washington.

REFERENCES

Carrell, P. L. 1983. Some issues in studying the role of schemata, or background knowledge, in second language comprehension. Paper presented at the 1983 TESOL Convention, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, March 16, 1983.

Cunningham, J. W. and E. O. Foster. 1978. The ivory tower connection: a case study. *The Reading Teacher 31:*365-369.

Guthrie, J. T. 1977. Story comprehension. *The Reading Teacher 30:*574-577.

Mandler, J. M. and N. S. Johnson. 1977. Remembrance of things parsed: story structure and recall. *Cognitive Psychology 9:*111-151.

Meyer, B. J. 1981. Basic research on prose comprehension: a critical review. In D. F. Fisher and C. W. Peters (Eds.) *Comprehension and the Competent Reader.* New York: Praeger Publishers.

Rumelhart, D. E. 1977. Understanding and summarizing brief stories. In D. Laberge and S. J. Samuels (Eds.) *Basic processes in reading: perception and comprehension.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Singer, H. and D. Donlan. 1982. Active comprehension: problem-solving schema with question generation for comprehension of complex short stories. *Reading Research Quarterly 17,*:166-185.

Stein, N. L. and C. G. Glenn. 1975. *A developmental study of children's recall of story material.* Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Denver, Colorado. (ERIC No. ED 115 386)

Stein, N. L. 1978. *How children understand stories: a developmental analysis.* (Tech. Rep. No. 69). Urbana: University of Illinois, Center for the Study of Reading. (ERIC No. ED 153 205)

Thorndyke, P. W. 1977. Cognitive structures in comprehension and memory of narrative discourse. *Cognitive Psychology 9:*77-110.

Whaley, J. F. 1981. Reader's expectations for story structure. *Reading Research Quarterly 17,*:90-114.