



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 28
Issue 3 April 1988

Article 1

4-1-1988

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Recommended Citation

Gray, M. J. (1988). Story Grammars: Are They Relevant for Classroom Teachers?. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 28 (3). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol28/iss3/1

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STORY GRAMMARS: ARE THEY RELEVANT FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS?

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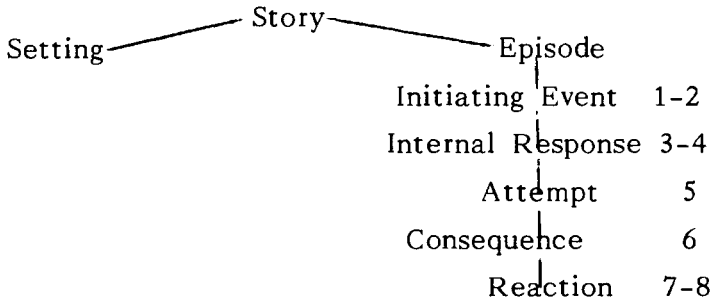
The great amount of comprehension research which has been conducted during the last twenty years has brought to the fore many new terms related to comprehension. To cite just a few, there are schema, comprehension monitoring, interactive processing, microstructure, macrostructure, story grammar, textual analysis, etc. While this area of research has much of value to offer teachers of reading, the number of new terms may overwhelm and discourage them from seriously attempting to acquaint themselves with the new information in the field of comprehension.

The focus of this article will be on one area which has received emphasis during this time, story grammar, and the relevance of this area for reading teachers.

Story Grammars

A story grammar consists of rules that build a story hierarchy. The major top level components according to Stein and Glenn's example are setting and episode. At the lower levels are the actions of characters which contribute to the solving of a problem and the achieving of a goal. See the figure below.

Figure 1



Source of Figure 1--Nancy Stein & Christine Glenn, "An Analysis of Story Comprehension in Elementary School Children," in New Directions in Discourse Processing Vol. 2, edited by Roy Freedle, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979.

There are two major categories delineated by Stein and Glenn. These are: Story = Setting + Episode. As the illustration shows, there are five components to the episodes. The initiating event sets the story in motion, causing the main character to react in some manner. The internal response is that character's reaction to that initiating action. The attempts are the actions carried out to attain a goal. Attainment or non attainment of the results of behavior are included under consequence. Finally, the reaction includes the character's response to consequence.

Let's take a look at how a story can work into the story grammar. The sentences in the story are numbered for more efficiency in diagramming and the numbers have been placed on Figure 1 in the appropriate columns.

Surprise for Peter

(1)The shadowy form darted back and forth in the back yard. (2)It moved in and out among the trees, bushes, and flowers. (3)Peter was inside the house playing with his toys (4)when he caught sight of this activity. (5)He looked out the window, and (6)the form became more distinct. (7)As he got a clearer view of the form, he laughed with delight (8)to think he had caught the Easter bunny hiding his eggs.

Questions which can be derived to draw attention to the elements of the story include:

Initiating Event--What is happening in Peter's back yard?

Response--How does Peter become aware of this?

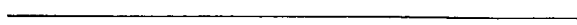
Attempt--What does Peter try to do?

Consequence--What did Peter find out?

Reaction--How did Peter feel?

Why did he feel that way?

Would you have felt like Peter? Why or why not?



What does all of this mean for you as a teacher of reading? Is story grammar something else which should be taught? To help move in the direction of an answer to this question, let us look at some of the benefits and limitations of the use of story grammars.

Benefits

A study conducted by Gordon and Braun (1982) had as a major purpose the investigation of effects of story schema training on reading comprehension and writing. It was hypothesized that direct instruction in story structure would increase the number of text structure categories not usually present in children's recall after a narrative used in instruction, and that such instructional effects would transfer to the reading of an unfamiliar but similarly organized narrative. It was also hypothesized that story schema (structure schemata) awareness would contribute significantly to literal and inferential comprehension if prior knowledge on the topic (content schemata) is developed to the same extent in both treatment groups (p. 263).

Fifty-seven fifth graders from one school population were the subjects in this study. It was found that the experimental group did recall significantly more text structure categories than did the control group as evidenced through a written recall of a new selection. It was also shown that while both groups had their background knowledge (content schemata) on the topic developed right before testing, the group who had been trained in story structure awareness had more correct answers than did the control group. Thus, the results of this study would seem to encourage instruction in story grammar.

Bruce (1978) feels failure to understand story structure could be an important factor in reading disability. He stresses the importance of giving children well formed material and points out many stories for beginners sacrifice the story line in order to teach important skills.

Morrow (1978) demonstrated the truth of this in a recent study which examined the story structures in selections of basal readers. He found three structures were the most common--confrontation, episodic, and

plotless. The three series with the greater emphasis on decoding skills had a higher percentage of plotless stories; the three that emphasized language and literature had more stories with emphasis on plot structure.

Asking a child to retell a story provides a very good means of determining the child's understanding of story structure. Through this procedure the teacher can determine what may be the child's view of the story and what s/h may be eliminating or adding to the story which may interfere with meaning.

A suggestion by Marshall (1983) to use questions based on story grammar to check comprehension can be very beneficial to children and teachers. It can help children learn what to look for in stories, thus assisting them in gaining a better understanding of what they have read. For the teacher in formulating these questions, it becomes evident which stories seem to fit into the story grammar mold and it is easier to evaluate the stories children are asked to read from a basal reader. It should assist in more effective text evaluation and selection. Marshall's suggestions are general enough to be adapted to fit any story grammar frame. They are as follows:

Theme: What is the major point of the story?
 What is the moral of the story?
 What did _____ learn at the end of the story?

Setting: Where did _____ happen?
 When did _____ happen?

Character: Who is the main character?
 What is _____ like?

Initiating
 Events: What is _____'s problem?
 What does _____ have to try to do?

Attempts: What did _____ do about _____?
 What will _____ do now?

Resolution: How did _____ solve the problem?
 How did _____ achieve the goal?
 What would you do to solve _____'s problem?

Reactions: How did _____ feel about the problem?
 Why did _____ do _____?
 How did _____ feel at the end?

Why did _____ feel that way?

How would you feel about _____?

If we think about a story which is familiar to all of us, let us see what questions could be incorporated. Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter has been selected for this exercise.

Theme: What did Peter learn at the end of the story?

Setting: Where did the story take place?

Character: Who is the main character? What is s/he like?

Initiating

Event: What is Peter's problem?

What does Peter have to try to do?

Attempts: What did Peter do about going into Mr. McGregor's garden?

Resolution: How did Peter solve his problem?

What would you have done if you had been Peter?

Reaction: How did Peter feel at the end?

Why did he feel that way?

How do you feel about the way Peter's mother treated him?

Why did Peter do what he did?

Both the formation of these questions and the answering of them force attention to elements of story structure. It is important that teachers keep in mind--a reader's knowledge of story seems to benefit both her/his comprehensions of the story and memory for the story.

Limitations

Dreher and Singer (1980) wanted to determine whether teaching intermediate grade students to identify structure of a story would improve their ability to recall a story. They found that fifth graders can learn to identify structure of a story as indicated by their ability to categorize story information into appropriate grammatical structures. The investigators felt that it is not necessary to teach this strategy, however, since learning to identify structure explicitly does not increase the amount or type of story information that students recall.

Sebesta, Calder, and Cleland (1982) point out that because story grammars are so precise and detailed, they are somewhat difficult to teach. They go on to say that perhaps that is the reason research regarding the effect to comprehension has not yielded consistent beneficial results.

Another limitation is the fact that only a limited range of stories can be represented by story grammars, so a recommendation for teaching them would be difficult to justify.

Additionally, besides looking at text structure, it is essential to look at the structure the reader imposed on the text. No two teachers approach a text with the same background and thus, the same perspective. Each of us has a certain perspective from which we read the text and make interpretations. While the final interpretations should not be widely discrepant, use of story grammars does not provide for considering varying reader perspectives. Teachers must remember that older children have a better schema for stories than do younger children. We do not yet know how and under what conditions this awareness of story schema develops. Part of it may be developmental in that older children have more experience with both typical and discrepant structures. The more experience we have with various forms of discourse, the easier it becomes to build a general framework in which to fit each of these.

Summary

While knowledge of story structure is of benefit to the reader in understanding and remembering the story, teaching this structure may not be the best way, and surely should not be the ONLY way, to arrive at understanding. The fact that this knowledge appears to be developmental is something teachers must be aware of. The brief overview of the benefits and limitations given here, along with some suggestions for implementation in the classroom should help to further acquaint reading teachers with the process of story grammar instruction. Whether or not teachers decide to implement instruction in this area for their students, knowledge of its operation can be of value to them. In this, as in many procedures,

selective adaptation by teachers may serve to enhance their instruction in reading.

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