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Teaching Story without Struggle: Using Graded Readers and Their Audio Packs in the EFL Classroom

In recent years the support for extensive reading (ER) in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) programs has been compelling. When practicing *extensive reading*, the learner reads a wide variety of texts for pleasure and achieves a general understanding of the content while deciphering unknown words through context. This approach contrasts with *intensive reading*, a more traditional approach based on a slow, careful reading of a text, with goals of complete comprehension and the identification of specific details and information.

Research supports the use of ER, as it benefits the development of speaking, listening, and writing language skills (Maley 2005), as well as involuntary vocabulary acquisition (Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua 2008). For this reason, ESL/EFL researchers and practitioners have compiled many useful methods and techniques for incorporating ER into ESL/EFL programs (Day and Bam-

ford 1998). In East Asian nations such as Korea—where EFL is increasingly central to education policy—more and more workshops, seminars, and conferences focus on helping teachers incorporate ER programs into their teaching contexts. There is a wide range of materials available for ER, including graded readers—novels and short stories that are calibrated to the different language levels of learners. However, despite the great support for what has been described as "the single most effective way to improve language proficiency" (Maley 2005, 354), the use of ER is limited in many Korean EFL contexts. The fact that Korean textbooks largely ignore ER contributes to the disparity between academic advocacy and actual classroom practice in a setting where traditional and culturally bound views of language learning still prevail; these views hold that "simply reading" is not a valid use of learning time, nor is it congruent with local expectations of the role of classroom

teachers. Consequently, intensive reading, accompanied by comprehension questions and language analysis tasks, continues to dominate in Korean classrooms.

In order to offer an alternative to this trend, we developed the Bimodal Narrative Approach (BNA). The bimodal (reading and listening) approach adheres to many of the main precepts of ER and expands the method by adding listening activities to the extensive reading of a graded reader novel and accompanying audio pack. This article will describe how the BNA was taught to a group of public school teachers participating in an in-service training program, including specific reading and listening activities and their evaluation.

Teaching context of the BNA

We developed the BNA to facilitate the development of teacher trainees' English language skills and proficiency. The instructional methods seek to improve reading and listening competencies separately, a fairly typical feature of intensive English programs on the peninsula. The trainees, who had various amounts of teaching experience and mixed levels of English competency, were divided into an elementary teachers' group and a secondary teachers' group, which were taught by two instructors who worked in tandem and used the text and audio of a graded reader—in this case the novel *Billy Elliot*—over a period of five weeks. Activities and exercises for each group alternated between the reading class and the listening class, with students reading two chapters of the novel and then listening to one chapter of the audio CD.

We made the decision to allocate two chapters for reading and one chapter for listening based on an assessment of the participants' listening skills relative to their reading ability. The traditional focus on intensive reading and grammar in Korean language education typically results in students being disproportionately more competent readers than listeners. Thus, a second listening is usually required for students to fully comprehend the content; as a result, it takes longer to cover a smaller amount of material. In contrast, the student controls the pace of silent reading, and one reading is usually sufficient. In other contexts, however, teachers adopting the BNA

are advised to consider their learners' skills and profiles before deciding on the ratio of content distribution between listening and reading.

Both the reading and listening classes utilized top-down processing techniques, in which previous experience and background knowledge were activated to aid comprehension and a connection with the text. Following each lesson, activities explored the issues raised by the novel. In addition to the audio CD, we included activities based on the original film and soundtrack to supplement both the reading and listening lessons. (See the Appendix for rules of thumb for employing the BNA.)

Billy Elliot—A Level 3 graded reader

The *Billy Elliot* Level 3 graded reader and audio CD (Burgess 2008) is a 15-chapter novel adapted from the movie script. We chose *Billy Elliot* because records from the ER library revealed that it was a popular selection for teacher trainees in previous programs. The story revolves around Billy, an 11-year-old boy growing up in a fictitious town in England in 1984. The town finds itself in the midst of a miners' strike that has a devastating impact upon Billy's family. Amidst the hardship, Billy desires to become a dancer—a desire that conflicts with the socially accepted norms of male behavior in the town. His struggle to achieve his dream, along with his transformation and that of those around him, shapes the narrative.

We deemed this story accessible both thematically and linguistically for the teacher trainees. Given the universal themes of family relationships, economic hardship, and overcoming adversity, limited background knowledge is required. Furthermore, the language level of the text places the novel well within the learners' linguistic range.

The BNA reading class

The reading class activities focus as much as possible on the narrative of the novel and allow students to respond reflectively, emotionally, and naturally to the content. The ER method replaces more traditional reading comprehension activities by providing students the opportunity to experience reading in English as a less stressful, more enjoyable experience.

Day and Bamford (1998, 7–8) list the following characteristics of ER that relate to the BNA:

1. The purposes of reading are usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.
2. Reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students.
3. Reading is individual and silent, at the student's own pace.
4. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
5. Teachers orient students to the goals of a program [and] explain the methodology.
6. The teacher is a role model of a reader for students.

Additional important ER characteristics mentioned by Day and Bamford (1998) also apply to the ER method if teachers wish to establish a graded reader borrowing library; in this scenario, students freely select from a wide variety of texts and topics for in-class and out-of-class reading.

The following sections describe the BNA reading class activities with reference to *Billy Elliot* (Burgess 2008).

Warm-up activity

The BNA reading class starts with a warm-up activity that introduces the topics to be covered in the chapters for that lesson. In the first reading class, a discussion of the lead character is based on imagery taken from the opening scenes of the movie *Billy Elliot*. This activity provides background knowledge about the story and is intended to enhance student engagement with the story. Subsequent classes also begin with a warm-up discussion related to the chapters for the pertinent lesson.

Prediction activity

Following the warm-up activity, students make predictions about what they are going to read. This activity provides students with a more immediate reason to read the chapters for the lesson. When the students speculate about content, they become motivated to read the story to check their predictions. One technique that we have used is to tell the students that one of the characters in the story had trouble with the law, and then have student groups guess what the character did to get in trouble. Students then read the story to check their predictions.

Reading activity

The students then read two chapters of *Billy Elliot* for 12 to 15 minutes. This is silent reading time, and students are encouraged to not use dictionaries, but rather to use the story's context to understand unfamiliar vocabulary.

Post-reading discussion

The students then work in groups to check their predictions against the reading and respond to the content through discussion questions that ask them to both identify what happened in the reading and give an opinion about the content. Post-reading discussions provide students with the opportunity to react to the reading and offer personal opinions about themes found in the story. For example, students explore the character Michael and his friendship with Billy and react to issues of sexual identity and other themes that resonate throughout the narrative. Additional activities to explore the important themes include:

1. *A text reconstruction.* A poem is used to introduce gender roles and stereotypes and examine socially acceptable behavior of genders. The poem is cut up into strips and students reassemble it, a task that facilitates close reading and discovery of its message. Students then discuss the poem's relationship to the story.
2. *Exploration of analogy.* Students compare characters from *Billy Elliot* and the fairy tale *Cinderella*, based on an article by Lancioni (2006).
3. *Lyrical analysis.* Students use lyrics from the original *Billy Elliot* soundtrack to prompt discussions of the characteristics and inherent qualities of the main characters.

The BNA listening class

The listening class incorporates techniques from ER, including listening for pleasure and facilitating understanding by engagement with the characters and events in *Billy Elliot*. However, the fleeting nature of the listening experience and practical obstacles present a challenge to certain characteristics of ER. For example, students cannot listen at their own pace, listening materials are not always within students' language level, and the speed is generally faster. We make an effort to mitigate these challenges by inserting top-down processing strategies;

that is, we provide relevant contextual information specific to the socio-historic context where appropriate, employ photographs and audio-visual material from the film, and encourage prediction prior to listening in class.

An important rule of thumb to keep in mind is that a graded listening level is usually "reading level minus 2" (Waring 2010). That is, a learner who reads at a Level 5 should, in theory, have no problem listening to and understanding the content of a Level 3 reader. Nonetheless, lexical or grammatical knowledge alone does not guarantee comprehension of a listening passage, as speaking speed also needs to be taken into account. Graded reader audio packs are not recorded at different speaking speeds for different learning levels; often they are designed with the expectation that learners will listen at the same time they read the text. Consequently, teachers should consider using a media player that can slow the audio speed if need be. Playing audio at 82 to 85 percent of natural speed generally allows students with a lower level of listening proficiency to complete the listening tasks. (Note: VideoLAN [VLC] is a free download that is available in many languages. It allows the teacher to play a clip at a slower speed. For video clips, reducing playing speed to 78 to 82 percent often helps students catch a good part of the language. The VLC media player also allows stills to be extracted from a movie.)

Overview of the listening class

For Level 3 graded readers, the average listening time for a whole chapter is seven to eight minutes—far too long for students to listen to in one go. To make the listening period manageable, the chapter is divided into two listening segments, Part 1 (P1) and Part 2 (P2). Each part is three to four minutes long and roughly corresponds to half the length of the chapter. In order to provide variety and have students practice different skills, activities associated with each part of the chapter are distinct. For the first half of the chapter, students focus on broad comprehension of events in the story, listening to segment P1 twice without looking at the text; for the second half, students listen to segment P2 once and fill out a gapped text exercise that focuses on predicting and recognizing specific words. The total listening time during the class is about 10 or 12 minutes.

Warm-up activity

As with the reading lesson, the warm-up generates interest in the story; one way to accomplish this is to show students the cover of the book and ask them to predict what the story is about, thus orienting them to the setting and social context of the story. For *Billy Elliot* we give students a brief description of the political situation in England in the early 1980s and tell them of Margaret Thatcher's determination to close mines throughout the country and the subsequent miners' strikes. We show pictures of the main characters and ask students to discuss what they expect the characters' personalities to be like. Finally, before the first listening activity, we teach key words from the story. With graded readers, students should know 90 to 95 percent of the key words.

In subsequent classes, the warm-up consists of reviewing what students have read in the previous reading class and discussing two or three questions related to the theme of the current chapter.

First and second listening:
Listening for content and main ideas

In the first listening, the students' task is to answer a previously posed question related to the main events. Before they listen a second time, we give ten multiple-choice questions to see how much of the story they have understood. We then play the audio track and students listen, checking their work before we discuss the answers as a class. In the first class we choose multiple-choice questions for this activity because it shows students they actually understand a lot of the content from just one listening and builds confidence in their listening skills. In subsequent classes, to make the activity a bit more challenging, we ask students to provide short answers to ten questions.

Third listening: The double gap fill

The next part of the listening class involves a double gap fill exercise and revolves around more detailed language comprehension and analysis. To begin, students might look at a series of still images taken from the feature film and describe what is happening, or they might watch a short clip from the movie with the sound off. Then we give them a handout where roughly a dozen words have

been removed; each word is replaced by "hint words" and a double set of blank lines, one line for Guess (G) and the other for Answer (A).

Guided by the hint words, and based on what they saw in the stills or the film clip, students fill in the G blanks with their predictions of what the missing word might be. We then play the listening passage, and students fill in the A blanks; finally, we check the answers as a class. Although this activity can be completed without a film clip, the clip makes it easier for students to guess missing words and at times may direct them toward more interesting vocabulary choices.

Here are two examples of a double gap fill exercise, based on an excerpt from *Billy Elliot* (Burgess 2008). In the sentences, (G)_____ is for the word they guess after watching the clip with the sound off, while (A)_____ is for the actual word they hear when the audio clip is played. The hint words are in bold.

Example 1:

Billy came home from school at four o'clock. Tony, Nan and I were waiting for him. This was an 1) (adj – ***special***) (G)_____ (A)_____ day for the family.

Example 2:

The door opened and there was Billy. I looked at him and then at the letter. He walked to the table and picked it up. Nobody spoke. We were all 2) (adj – ***feeling***) (G)_____ (A)_____. Then Billy went into Nan's room and closed the door.

(The answer for Example 1 is *important*, and for Example 2 it is *uncomfortable*.)

The listening lesson culminates with discussion questions that elicit opinions from the students about what is happening in the story and that compare life in the UK to life in the students' country. Finally, to have them think ahead to their next reading class, we ask students to make predictions about what they think is going to happen in the following chapter.

Additional video-based activities

By selecting a story based on a film, we were able to integrate film clips into the telling of the narrative. In addition to their usefulness for the double gap fill exercise above,

we have found the following video-based activities to be particularly helpful and of interest to students:

1. *Visually stimulated recap and review* (for both reading and listening classes). Use clips from the movie as the basis for activities linking the reading class with the listening class, using prediction to foster continued interest in the story. For *Billy Elliot*, many of these selected scenes can focus on Billy's dancing so that students have a better sense of his struggles and personal growth.

2. *Who said that?* Students watch a scene from the video with the sound off. Then they are given six or seven lines of dialogue from the related passage in the novel and guess who said which line based on the scene. Students listen to the audio clip and check their answers.

3. *Dialogue strips.* After listening to the audio from the graded reader, students receive a short dialogue from the film that matches the section from the graded listening they have just heard. The movie dialogue, which is slightly different from what they have just listened to, is cut into strips. In pairs, students assemble the dialogue and then watch the scene to check whether they have put the strips in the correct order.

4. *Word change.* After students listen to the graded listening, they are given five sentences from the passage and asked to listen for key words that have been changed in the movie clip of the same scene. Students watch the clip and write down the new words. Single words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs) or short phrases work better than full sentences.

Word change example

Instructions: Read the sentences below from the graded reader. Then watch the video clip and replace the words in bold with those used by the character in the movie.

Jackie: How much (1) **will the ballet school audition** cost?
Mrs. Wilkinson: (2) **I can lend** you the money.
[Answers: (1) How much **is it gonna** cost? (2) I**'ll give** you the money.]

5. *Write and compare.* Students write a short speech or monologue for a character and then compare it with what the character says in the movie. For *Billy Elliot*, we select a key speech from Billy's audition interview and give students the following question:

> Imagine you are Billy's teacher and you are preparing him for the audition. How would you advise him to answer this question: "Billy, what does it feel like when you're dancing?" With a partner, write Billy's answer for him (five or six sentences). What body language should he use?

> After answers are elicited, the class votes to select the best speech. We then view the film clip and compare the content of Billy's answer with those provided by students.

At the end of each listening class, we distribute the full text of the chapter to give students the opportunity to read what they have just heard, which most students do voluntarily. We prefer to photocopy each individual chapter so that students do not read ahead. (A license to photocopy a graded reader can be purchased from or granted by the publisher.)

Evaluation of the BNA

For now we have no formal evaluation for the *Billy Elliot* BNA classes, as these comprise only one part of a seven-week listening and reading skills acquisition course with a separate evaluation at the end. Both classes employ core textbooks from which tests are created for the session's evaluation.

We also base the decision to not test upon completion of the *Billy Elliot* reader to adhere as much as possible to the original tenets of ER and allow students to enjoy the experience of using graded novels in class without the stress of a final evaluation. Instead, we divide students into groups of four, and they compete in a lighthearted *Jeopardy!* game that informally assesses their knowledge of the story.

Other teaching contexts may of course have different requirements. In such cases, possible evaluation methods include the following:

1. *Written essay.* Students select a character from *Billy Elliot* and write a 1,000-word essay describing how that character has evolved over the course of the story.
2. *Pen and paper test.* Students answer true/false or multiple-choice questions, or write short answers to questions that test comprehension of the story.
3. *Listening test.* Students listen to excerpts from passages drawn from the chapters they have read in the reading class. They identify the speaker, the speaker's mood or intentions, and the moment the scene occurred in the story.
4. *Video clip test.* Select three or four short video clips the length of a scene that test key vocabulary. For example, in *Billy Elliot* the scene that shows miners protesting as some of their former colleagues ride a bus back into work will test knowledge of terms like *picket line, scab, protest,* and *strike.* Play the first video clip with the sound off. Students watch and then write a short paragraph describing what they saw. Repeat the procedure for the subsequent clips.

Impact on reading skills, listening skills, and motivation

What was BNA's effect on reading and listening ability? As the approach here was employed for 10 hours over a seven-week course in which students receive a total of 70 hours of listening and reading practice, it is difficult to assess its impact with total accuracy. There are, however, some methods that may be used for students to chart their own progress.

Self-evaluation techniques for reading and listening

- *Timed reading* (Bamford and Day 2004). To chart reading rate, students go to the beginning of a chapter. The teacher tells them to begin reading and stops them after one minute. The students note where they stop, count the number of words they have read, and enter the total in a reading log. This procedure can be conducted in the first and last class or repeated every week.
- *Listening scores.* To chart listening comprehension progress, students keep a

listening log and enter the number of detail questions they are able to answer after the first listening in each class.

Student feedback

A survey conducted at the end of a five-week period indicates that the teacher trainees enjoyed BNA, wanted to experience it again with another graded reader, and were motivated to continue using graded novels and their audio packs for personal pleasure outside class. The students found that the film clips added an enjoyable and interesting element to the classes, and many expressed a desire to watch the movie in its entirety. Furthermore, the sign-out sheets from the program's lending library indicated that the majority of trainees read from three to five graded readers outside class in the subsequent seven-week session, a marked increase from rates before trainees participated in the BNA classes. The listening library, a collection of graded reader CD audio packs, was also available; however, far fewer students took advantage of these resources.

Conclusion

This article describes the practical basis of BNA, which uses ER methods to facilitate the successful exploitation of graded novels in ESL/EFL settings. In our experience, ER has extensive benefits that are supported by research and literature. Nevertheless, the perception of many students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in diverse educational contexts is often that "simply reading" is not "studying," and is therefore a less legitimate method for developing language skills. We believe that teacher trainees and their students will better appreciate the effectiveness of using graded novels and audio packs in ESL/EFL contexts if the bimodal approach includes:

- utilizing linguistically accessible materials with appropriate themes;
- giving primacy to the narrative; and
- using related authentic materials to promote reader/listener engagement.

While our development of the BNA is ongoing, the success of both the pilot and subsequent implementation of the course has initiated requests for further development from participants in in-service training programs sponsored by regional offices of education. This positive feedback has encouraged us to further share our experience of "what has worked" and invite discussion of the BNA. Although the methods described here have room to evolve into a more structured classroom use of graded novels, we nonetheless believe that bimodal narrative teaching has implications for language education in teaching contexts that have traditionally resisted the use of ER programs. We hope the refinement and adoption of the BNA will allow teachers to add a valuable approach to their reading and listening classes and forge a pathway to English acquisition through meaningful and relevant novels, recordings, and films.

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Rules of Thumb for the Bimodal Narrative Approach

*Teaching Story without Struggle: Using Graded Readers… • **Michael Rabbidge and Nico Lorenzutti***

The following rules of thumb are important to ensure successful implementation of the Bimodal Narrative Approach in reading and listening classes.

1. Choose a good story that is suitable for your class.

2. Students should know about 90 to 95 percent of the story's vocabulary.

3. The listening level should be the reading level minus 2 (e.g., Level 5 reading = Level 3 listening).

4. Divide the novel's chapters into listening and reading sections (our ratio is one chapter listening, two chapters reading).

5. Focus on the story more than the language.

6. Use authentic materials—songs, poems, and pictures—to enhance reader/listener engagement.

7. Books related to movies work well and provide the opportunity to use a variety of film-related activities.

8. VLC media player, a free download available in many languages, has a function that allows you to pull still images out of movie clips. More importantly, it allows you to reduce the playing speed of an audio or video clip. For graded audio packs, reduce audio speed to 82 to 85 percent if need be. For video clips, play at 78 to 82 percent of the original speed.