

# Text Structure Awareness: Another Look at Reading Comprehension Strategy in L2 Classes

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## ABSTRACT

*Researchers have shown that skilled readers use variety of strategies to comprehend written texts (Stanovich, 2000; Sweet & Snow, 2003). Hence many readers are not aware of reading strategies; there is a need of explicit teaching instruction to develop those strategies. In fact, in most English reading classes there is absence of teaching comprehension strategies to readers, the strategy usually employed is, finding the meaning of the unknown vocabularies or translating the texts in to students' native language, this approach only enables students to comprehend the passage partially. Reading research has indicated that readers' awareness of different kinds of text structure has been a useful strategy for better comprehension. All texts have certain styles of writing, which not only distinguishes them from other types of texts but they are also of great help in conveying the authors' messages and recalling the texts. Teachers play an important role in assisting students in developing reading comprehension strategies including expository text structure awareness (Pearson & Duke, 2002).*

**Keywords:** Reading Comprehension, Text structure

## INTRODUCTION

Farrell (2009) believes that developing reading ability in children starts years before they enter school. Their reading ability improves as they start their academic studies, with the help of their teachers. In reading classes, students' family background, social and even cultural background is differentiating students' comprehension from one individual to another. However most of them have similarity in the amount of lexical, grammatical and discourse knowledge at the initial stage of learning. For example Grabe & Stoller (2002) mentioned that at the age of six most first language readers are ready to read because they have already learned (tacitly) grammatical structure of their own language and they have built up vocabulary of almost 7000 words. When it comes to how to read and comprehend in L2 or FL, it is observed that learners are encountering many difficulties. One example can be mentioned based on Farrell (2009), second or foreign language learners lack that word bank to draw on when learning to read. Apart from vocabulary size difference among first language and second or foreign language readers, there is still another major difference, which cannot be ignored, and that is, what the researchers have called it as tacit knowledge. Here comes the idea of additional instruction for L2 or FL readers who do not have that tacit knowledge. As Farrell (2009) suggested that because L2 or FL learners do not have a tacit knowledge of the second language grammar, they need additional instruction in building a foundation of structural knowledge and text organization for more effective reading comprehension.

The texts, which are presented by the authors, are in to two different kinds of prose, Narrative prose and Expository prose. Bakken & Whedon (2002) argue that narrative prose is very familiar to the children because they have learned using this kind of prose. For example, they are mentioning to the fairy tales and stories that because they are familiar for the children, it is easier for them to comprehend. One other reason for better comprehension of this kind of text based on Bakken & Whedon (2002) is that children know what to expect while reading so they will focus their attention on remembering what they have read. Cook (1983) is talking about the difficulty of expository texts. Cook argues that because expository texts presents facts, theories and dates, and the information is largely unfamiliar to the readers, they seem harder than narrative texts and more over this unfamiliarity impedes their comprehension. Obviously the necessity of being familiar with expository texts will be increased when we come to know that most of the academic texts are expository. Both narrative and expository structures contain text organization. For example, narrative texts include patterns of characters, events, goals, plots, and conclusions (e.g., Gurney, Gersten, Dimino, & Carnine, 1990).

The special structures which expository texts are included are main idea, events and result, compare-/contrast, as well as problem / solution text structures (e.g., Meyer & Freedle, 1984).many studies have been done on comparing teaching text structures versus traditional reading instruction in which the students are asked to read the passage alone and try to answer the questions that followed the text passage. Most of the researches have consensus on the positive effect of students' awareness of text structure on their reading comprehension. (Refer to A. Gaddy et al. 2008; Alastair Sharp, 2004). The results of Sharp's experiment demonstrate that organizational patterns (text structure) can have a strong influence on reading.

### **EXPOSITORY TEXT STRUCTURES**

Expository texts are texts that are used by the authors to give information, to explain, to describe, or to persuade. (A.Gaddy et al, 2008). Based on what Gaddy has described expository texts, most academic content are presenting in expository texts. Each expository text has usually got one type of structure. Ornstein (1994, p.82) has defined the structure of the text as, "the main ideas of the text, how information is organized, as well as the verbal and textual cues (or pedagogical aids) that help organize and bring unity to the text." With this definition about structure of the text, the importance of being aware of it seems necessary and useful. As students' awareness of the different types of structures will help them to infer the information which is necessary to comprehend from the text, although there might be some unknown vocabulary or unfamiliar grammar.

There is a number of listing for types of text structure and almost different authors used various terminology. Meyer & Freedle (1984) have organized five basic expository text structures. (Descriptive, Sequential, Causation (Cause/Effect), Problem/Solution and Comparison (Compare & Contrast). Meyer (1989) believes that it is the structure of the text, which makes it different from list of words. She also defines good readers as readers who are able to use those top level structures to organize their recall and defines poor readers as readers who are not able to do so. Knowledge about how expository text is structured, however, will not guarantee comprehension, but having a clear understanding of how the text is structured will help the reader build a coherent model of the text. (Susan Dymock, 2005). Koda (2005) also believes that EFL and ESL reading teachers should provide their students a preview about the text and the topic rather than merely asking the students reading the texts.

The basic pattern of five expository text structure based on Meyer & Freedle (1984) is shown in the table 1. Based on Ciardiello (2002), students have particular difficulty identifying the organizational pattern of cause/effect. McCormick (2003) has suggested, "Cause/effect structure is difficult because of the complex comprehension skills (i.e., making inferences, judging sequence, and making predictions) involved in the interpretation of causes and effects."

#### **FIVE BASIC EXPOSITORY TEXT STRUCTURE**

Description	Elements are grouped by association with one element of the association subordinate to another (topic)
Sequence	Elements are grouped in temporal order
Causation (Cause / Effect)	Elements are grouped before and after time and are causally or quasi-causally related
Problem / Solution	Elements are organized in the same fashion as cause /effect with the addition of overlapping elements between problem and solution, and one element of the solution 's ability to block an antecedent to the problem
Comparison (Compare & Contrast)	Elements are organized on the basis of similarities and differences between two topics

[Source: Meyer & Freedle, 1984]

The early elementary grades are an ideal time to teach text structure (Adams, 1990). At the very least, young children can be taught that reading information texts often involves dual purposes of reading to locate particular information (Dreher, 1993;Guthrie & Kirsch, 1987) and to learn something new. Dymock (2005) argues that "Students encounter several common expository text structures during their first six years at school and beyond." she also believes that if the teachers portray the diagram of each structure, it will enable the students to see the structure that each author has used. Descriptive and sequential structures are common structures found school reading material. Dymock (2008)

mentioned to three common descriptive patterns found in school reading material for 6- to 12-yearolds, which are the list, web, and matrix (compare/contrast). Calfee & Patrick (1995) believe that the list is a basic descriptive pattern. It can be as simple as listing your groceries. Dymock (2005) is defining the web as "the attributes of an object are discussed". The web diagram in Figure 1, completed by an 11-year-old, is based on an article on the kakapo, a New Zealand native bird (Bryant, 1990).

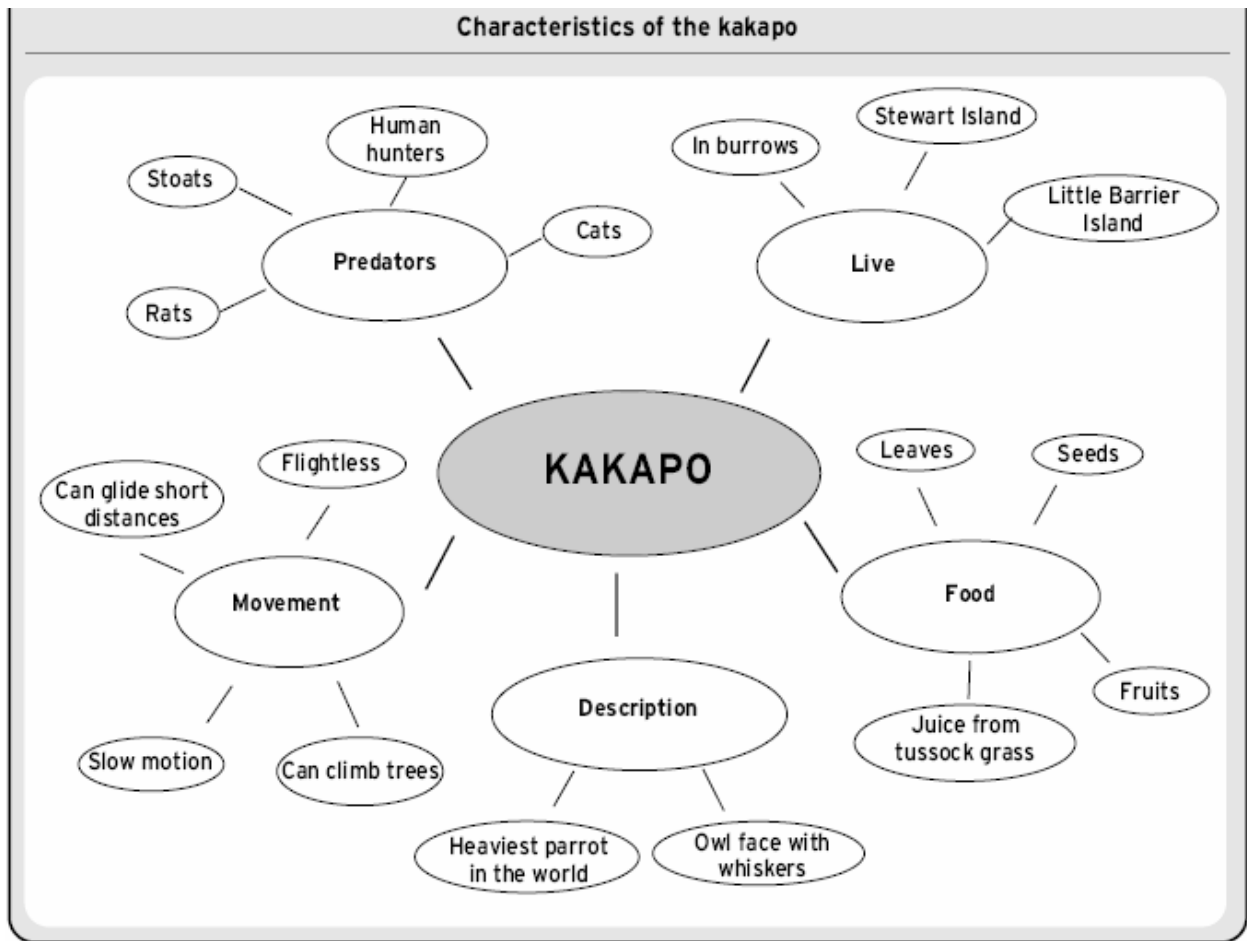


Figure 1

Source taken from Dymock (2005)

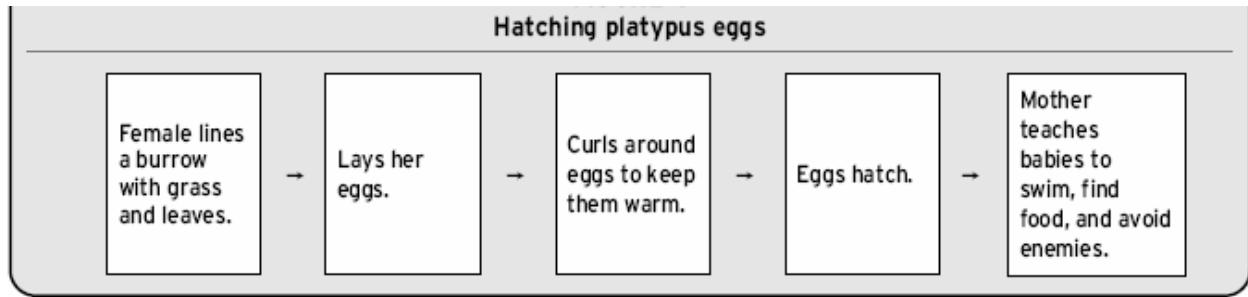
Calfee & Patrick (1995) are defining matrix as "The matrix compares and contrasts two or more topics." For example, the author may be comparing the features of brown, polar, and black bears; native birds; two Brazilian cities; or volcano types. (Dymock, 2005) the figure 2 is based on an article that a 6 year old level has written on mud (Meharry, 2001).

Matrix for animals and mud				
Animal	Does the animal like mud?	What animal does in the mud	What mud does for the animal	Size of animal
Pig	Yes	Rolls	Keeps it cool	Large
Frog	Yes	Sleeps	Helps it hide	Small
Water buffalo	Yes	Stands	from enemies	Very large
Rhinoceros	Yes	Bathes	Keeps bugs away	Very large
			Protects it from the sun	

Figure 2

Source taken from Dymock (2005)

Another common structure is found in schools' texts are Sequential structures. "Sequential structures present a series of events that progress over time. Normally, sequence texts are set out in a first-to last pattern" (Dymock (2005). Calfee & Patrick (1995) are referring to the string pattern as a common pattern in beginning reading material as well as in the material students encounter at the high school level. Dymock (2005) argues that in the string pattern a chronological description of events is given ("e.g., steps involved in baking bread or harvesting carrots)."She is also mentioning that in science books, sequential pattern can be found even when the students are reading about life cycle of the duckbilled platypus. The string pattern in Figure 3 is based on a section of *The Duckbilled Platypus: Nature's Experiment* (Bremer, 1984). The text is at the 10- to 12-year-old reading level.



**Figure 3**

Source taken from Dymock (2005)

Dymock (2005) argues that "many students are unaware that exposition follows an organized pattern. These students require direct instruction in how to go about comprehending expository text structures". She also believes that children who have a good understanding of the structure of expository text have fewer problems with comprehension. So it is obvious that students, who are not aware of these patterns, will not be able to use the comprehension strategy while reading and the chance of being fully comprehended will be decreased. Here comes the idea of direct teaching of these structures especially from the early ages at school in reading classes. Moreover, the role of teachers cannot be denied. Dymock (2005) is talking about the important role of teachers in assisting children to develop a good understanding of expository text structure. Reading teachers, especially EL2/EFL teachers who are teaching the students who might not have sufficient background of the English knowledge and consequently need more help in comprehending reading texts, play an important role in developing comprehension strategies in their learners.

### DEFINITION

EL2: English taught and learned as a second language in the native country in which English is not the main or dominant language.

EFL: English taught and learned as a foreign language in the native country in which English is not the first language.

Text structure: The structure of the text from Meyer (1989) is the organization that binds the text together and gives it an overall organization. The structure shows how some ideas are of central importance to the author's message, which is bounded by this overall organization, while others are shown to be peripheral (Meyer, 1989)

Reading comprehension: Reading comprehension is the ability of the reader to construct meaning from the text with combining the prior knowledge and previous experience with the topic, the information in the text and the stance the reader takes in relation to the text (Farrell, 2009).

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