



Boosting Reading Skills, Narrative Intelligence & Moral Reasoning through Fictional Narrative-based Reading Instruction: a Comparative Study of Text Genres

Azar Hosseini Fatemi

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad (Iran)
hfatemi@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir

Abstract

Due to narrative aspect of human brain, fictional narratives have the potential to be used as instructional material for enhancing learners' narrative competence as well as language skills. Nevertheless, the contribution of Narrative Intelligence (NI) which constructs an important part of the cognitive abilities for language learning skills has rarely been exploited to its full potential in ESL/EFL classes. This article made inquiry into the outcome of implementing a narrative-based reading instruction in search of empirical support for such a claim. To this end, this study set out to investigate the impact of two genres of narration and exposition on subjects' reading skills, NI, and moral reasoning. Data were collected from a sample of 91 Iranian EFL learners studying at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. Two intact groups of 47 and 44 who took a four-unit reading course were randomly assigned to two types of treatments. The first group received fictional narratives and the second one expository texts. Both groups were taught by the researcher herself for a period of 17-week university semester during fall 2010. The instruments used to measure the variables under study were: Reading section of TOFEL for homogeneity of the groups; Randall's Narrative Intelligence Scale (1999); moral Judgment Scale; and final reading skills test. The data were analyzed by using a series of independent and matched-pair t-tests, and correlation analysis. The results unfolded several illuminating facts about the superiority of narrative over expository mode in enhancing learners' reading skills such as forming the main idea, reading between the lines, comprehension and recall. The subjects' performance on moral reasoning scale showed that narrative mode facilitated their ethical reflection, predictive inferences as well as NI. In all cases the narrative group outperformed the other group, thus affording narration with its affective, cognitive, socio-cultural and linguistic dimensions a unique status to be used as instructional material in EFL classrooms.

1. Introduction

As a child, narrative frameworks become an important part of the way we learn to approach the world (Nelson, 1989); and by telling stories we make sense of the world. It is this human ability to organize experience into narrative form that Blair and Meyer (1997) call "Narrative Intelligence" (NI). Randall defines NI as "The capacity to formulate and follow a story by means of such intertwining sub-capacities to emplot, characterize, narrate, genre-ate, and thematize" (1999, 15). Studying the narrative aspect of human cognition though has gained more attention from cognitive linguists recently (cf. Bruner, 1998; Pavlenko, 2007), practitioners do not seem to be sensitive enough to the issue of NI., and the effect of its explicit teaching on language learning. An aspect which has not so far been studied is the relationship between NI. and reading skills. Based on a study conducted to investigate the effect of literary narratives as opposed to expository texts on subjects' reading skills, NI, moral reasoning, and other situation-related



emotions such as empathy, this article makes inquiry into the outcome of implementing such a pedagogy in reading classrooms. These issues are touched upon by raising the following questions:

1. Do the subjects develop the same reading skills when exposed to two different modes of reading materials?
2. Does literary narrative boost NI?
3. Does literary narrative change the course of learners' moral reasoning and judgment?
(Do the moral position subjects take in MRS the same after having been exposed to two modes of reading?)
4. Which group empathizes more with the protagonist?

2. Literature Review

The significant relationship between narrative abilities of human mind and its linguistic functions can be traced in numerous studies in Applied Linguistics (Biaylstock, 2002), cognitive linguistics (Thomson, 2005), and education (Hussein, 2008). Some scholars have expressed their views in this regard. Depal (1993) points out that comprehension of a literary narrative compels readers to make inferences, so as to understand the emotions and motivations of the characters. Schulhauser (1990) investigated the effect of literature based curricula on subjects' cognitive and analytical abilities. Hosseini Fatemi and Adel (2010) investigated the effect of reading narrative and expository modes of discourse on summary writing tasks. The overall findings showed that the expository group experienced more cognitive burden in all domains of Englehard's (1992) rating model. Babaii and Yazdanpanah (2010) studied the effect of explicit teaching of story structures on EFL learners' narrative ability in speaking. Cotton, J. et.al (2007) have investigated "Predictors of moral reasoning. They came up with the idea that reading literary narratives enhances reflections about ethical problems related to social issues.

3. Method

3.1. Subjects

A sample of 91 Iranian EFL learners (both male & female) with the age range of 19-25 who were studying English Language & Literature at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran, participated in the study. Two intact groups of 47 and 44 who took a four-unit reading course (as a BA degree requirement) were randomly assigned to two types of reading materials during a four-month term taught by the researcher herself.

3.2. Instrumentation

Four instruments were used in this study:

- a. The reading section of TOFEL test for deciding on the homogeneity of the groups.
- b. Final Reading Exam.
- c. Randall's (1999) Narrative Intelligence Scale (NIS) was used to measure participants NI. The scale includes 35 items (validated by Pishghadam et al.) divided into five sub-sections labeled as: 1. Emplotment; 2. Characterization; 3, Narration; 4. Genre-ation; 5. Thematization; each corresponding to sub-abilities of NI. The subjects' ability for realizing each of the dynamics of NI is rated separately and the total score indicates their NI.

d. Moral Reasoning Scale: This scale has the format of a questionnaire. After having read the story, the subjects who are confronted with a moral conflict, are asked to put themselves in the characters' position, to imagine what it would be like and what they would have done in that position. They had to make some moral reasoning and judgments about the main characters' thinking, attitude, motive, emotions, and causal relations. Finally they are required to specify whether they empathized with the protagonist or not.

e. A version of Chekhov's "The Butterfly" a fictional narrative told by an omniscient narrator, who gives readers direct access to Olga's thoughts, feelings, and senses.

3.3. Procedure

At the beginning of the term, the reading section of TOFEL test was given to both groups as a test of homogeneity. During the term, subjects were exposed to two different text genres, Group A read essays in expository discourse mode while Group B read stories in narrative mode. However the other instructional approaches were the same. The last week of the term, the subjects in both groups were given an envelope containing a narrative task: Chekhov's story, "The Butterfly" along with NIS and Moral reasoning questionnaire. They were required to read the story for eliciting data on their moral reasoning and judgment, and NI based on the framework proposed by Randall (1999). With one week interval, Final Reading Exam was administered.

4. Results

An independent t-test compared the performance of both groups on reading section of TOFEL. The result as displayed in table 1 confirms the homogeneity of groups as the value of t=observed is not significant, $P \text{ value} = 0.487 > \alpha = 0.05$.

Table 1. t-test of homogeneity of groups

	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
T test for Equality Of Means			
Pre-test	1.659	89	0.487

The first question was put to test by means of an independent sample t-test to see whether the students have developed different reading skills after being exposed to two different modes of reading materials. Table 2 displays the result.

Table 2. Independent t-test, Final Reading Exam

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference
Equal Variances assumed	1.360	0.48	7.681	89	.000	15.40	3.40
Equal Variances Not assumed			7.68			15.40	3.40

As Table 2 shows the difference between the two mean scores is statistically significant, $t(89) = 7.06$, $p < .05$, that is the narrative group (B) has higher scores in L2 reading course than expository one. Group B showed better reading comprehension skills as well as better vocabulary retention and recall as compared with the first group.

The second question deals with the comparison of the performance of both groups on NIS. The subjects' responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale on the 35 NI items with higher scores indicating more narrative intelligence. The results as indicated in Table 3 shows that group B outperformed group A. The results suggest that subjects in Group B were more adequate perceivers of other people's emotions and intentions.

Table 3. Variability in the performance of both groups on NIS

	Levene's test for Equality of Variances		T- test for Equality of Means				
	f	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std Error Difference
Equal Variances assumed / not assumed	4.595	.036	6.576	89	.000	7.933	1.697

The third question concerns the performance of subjects on Moral Reasoning Scale. The subjects were supposed to put themselves in the protagonist shoes in order to get emotionally involved in the story events. There was no right or wrong answers on MRS. Based on the responses, Group B proved to be in a better position to understand what emotions and motives people in certain situations have since the stories they had read were assumed to influence their beliefs about casualty. These in turn presumably facilitated ethical reflection and thus changed the course of their moral judgment.

With respect to the fourth question, in order to see which group empathized more with the protagonist, the responses of both groups were compared. Group B was more likely to put themselves in the shoes of several characters and thus looked at events from different perspectives, %86 (as compared with %16) empathized with Olga, the protagonist.

The second question was tested again by Pearson-product moment correlation to see whether there was any relationship between subjects' performance on NIS and their reading achievement .Table 4 summarizes the correlation coefficient between the two sets of scores.

Table 4. Correlation between NIS and Reading Scores

		NIS	Reading Score
NIS	Pearson Correlation	1	.738
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	91	91
Reading Score	Pearson Correlation	.738	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	
	N	91	91

As shown, the positive correlation coefficient of 0.738 at $p < 0.05$ is significant. This means that the higher the learners' scores are on NIS, the higher achievers they are.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

Although the findings suggest that both groups expanded their vocabulary, and reading skills, but Group B outperformed Group A in developing better reading comprehension skills such as getting the main idea and reading between the lines as well as better lexical knowledge .What has caused such differences may have been explained in terms of having been exposed to different reading materials. Whereas the data show that essays did not influence readers' inferences, Group B developed an overall literacy competence. One of the outstanding differences between the mental activities of essay and story readers is that the latter form a representation of characters' goals and emotions. Group B was better equipped to understand characters and causal relations in the story. The essays in expository mode did not influence readers' inferences. This means that it is something particular in narrative that affects readers' notions about other people's feelings and goals. Reading a story requires readers to activate their schematic knowledge to understand causal relations in narratives, infer characters' emotions and motives. Another explanation is that it had been readers' role-taking behavior that caused the differences between the groups.

Group B who read a variety of fictional narratives showed an open-minded attitude toward ethical problems and better moral reasoning skills. When the subjects were asked to put themselves in the shoes of characters, they participated in the fictional world and were thus stimulated to reflect on what the implications would be for themselves to be in a position similar to that of the protagonist. Such thought experiences are impossible when reading expository texts. The findings are in line with earlier findings by Zillmann (1991), who believes that reading broadly exposes one to a multitude of ethical systems and moral perspectives thus causes an expansion and deepening of one's moral awareness.

Although both groups were given the same task of reading "The Butterfly" the last week of the term, their judgments were different. Based on the results of MRS, the subjects' emotional involvement in narrative events had great impact on their moral reasoning and judgment and empathic response due to



understanding situation-related emotions and motives. This might be explained in terms of being exposed to different types of reading material. The literary narratives acquainted the subjects in group B with a wide range of moral perspectives. These subjects' empathic response to questions raised in MJS shed light on the fact that they mentally participated in the characters' world and temporarily shared the same desires and anxieties characters had, which in turn affected their moral judgment. Even when it was against the norms and values of their culture.

Since the narrative group's performance on NIS was much better, we can infer that explicit teaching of story structure (e.g. understanding, reasoning, interpreting relations, connections, plots, and characters) has been effective not only for learning language components but also for boosting their narrative competence. The findings support the argument that reading literary narratives offered Gr. B an opportunity to train their ethical faculty. Obviously, further research is called for to make more generalized statements about the positive or possibly negative impact of reading fictional narratives on social perception and moral judgment.

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