RUSSELL GERSTEN AND JOSEPH DIMINO

Teaching Literature to At-Risk Students

That literature can be fun to read and perhaps have application to their own lives can be a revelation for low-achieving students who experience story grammar instruction.

Reading and analyzing good literature enables students to gain a richer perspective on their own life experiences and to enter new and different worlds. Even for students with lower than average performance, these possibilities should be abundant, but they are not (Goodlad and Oakes 1988). For example, the report based on findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Who Reads Best?*, concluded that "poor readers receive qualitatively different instruction," compared to what good readers receive, and that their teachers are "less likely to emphasize comprehension and critical thinking and more likely to focus on decoding strategies" (Applebee et al. 1988, pp. 5-6). According to the report's authors, these patterns of differential instruction persist in high school.

Here we describe an approach for teaching literary analysis to at-risk secondary students that has been empirically validated in three research studies. The instructional method is based on two seemingly esoteric concepts, *scaffolding* and *story grammar*. It also relies heavily on the body of research on effective teaching principles for low-achieving students (Rosenshine 1986).

Scaffolding

Scaffolding, based on the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, is an instructional process that enables students to solve a problem or achieve a goal they could not accomplish on their own. The teacher concentrates on developing skills that are emerging in the students' repertoire but that are as yet immature (Palincsar 1986). In scaffolded instruction, the teacher often "thinks aloud," explaining to students in a step-by-step fashion how he or she reached a specific conclusion.

In scaffolded instruction, the teacher often "thinks aloud" in a step-by-step fashion how he or she reached a specific conclusion.

Scaffolded instruction creates a shared language between students and teachers, so that teachers can provide useful, readily understood feedback to students when they need prompts to overcome difficulties (Gersten and Carnine 1986). There is a great deal of dialogue between teacher and students. As soon as possible, the students take over; and the role of the teacher shifts to that of a coach, pushing students to express their thoughts on increasingly complex issues. Gradually, the temporary structure, or "scaffold," is removed; and students perform independently.

In order for teachers to "think aloud" and break down the process of making complex inferences into small steps, some consistent framework or structure must be used. One framework that has been successfully used in reading instruction is called *story grammar*.

Story Grammar

Story grammar evolved from work of cognitive psychologists and anthropologists, who found that, regardless of age or culture, when individuals relate stories they have read or heard, their retellings follow a set pattern. Story grammar refers to this pattern. Chil-

dren, even as young as age six, demonstrate rudimentary story grammar and use their knowledge of how stories are structured to help them remember important details (Mandler and Johnson 1977).

Various researchers (Stein and Trabasso 1982, Mandler and Johnson 1977, and Thorndyke 1977) have established slightly different story grammar systems, but all are remarkably similar. (In barest form, the main character runs into some kind of problem or conflict and tries to resolve it. After several attempts, he or she resolves, or fails to resolve, the problem.) Story grammar involves the articulation of the character's conflict, a description of attempts to solve the problem, and an analysis of the chain of events that lead to resolution; it also includes analysis of how characters react to the events in the story and articulation of the story's theme or themes.

Research on Story Grammar

In the 1980s, reading researchers began to wonder whether explicit instruction in story grammar would improve students' comprehension. Singer and Donlan were the first researchers to design an instructional intervention based on story grammar. They worked with average-ability 11th graders using short stories from a high school literature anthology. For one week students were taught five major story grammar elements (character, goal, obstacle, outcome, and theme). While reading, they were instructed to ask themselves questions about each element. For example, for *character*, they might ask themselves, "Is this story going to be about the barber or the officer?" (Singer and Donlan 1982). They were then told to answer each of these questions while reading the story.

The researchers' intent was to structure the students' approach to reading and to focus the students on the key issues and themes in the story. Results indicated that the five-day instructional unit did, in fact, improve students' comprehension of the stories read, at least as measured by multiple-choice tests. The only area where no improvement was noted was for the most difficult component of story grammar: articulating the theme of the story.

The next researchers to study story grammar (Carnine and Kinder 1985, Idol and Croll 1987) worked with younger students in grades 4 through 6 and, unlike Singer and Donlan, targeted low-achieving students, those in Chapter 1 and special education programs. Their approaches were much more structured and interactive than in the Singer-Donlan study.

The precise modus operandi was different in the two studies—Idol and Croll used a visual map of the story grammar elements, whereas Carnine and Kinder relied on a series of structured verbal interactions based on a simplified set of four story grammar questions: (1) Who is the story about? (2) What is he or she trying to do? (3) What happens when he or she tries to do it? and (4) What happens in the end? Yet the essentials of the interventions were quite similar. Both sets of researchers used instructional procedures based on effective teaching research (Rosenshine 1986). At the beginning, the teacher modeled and

Name _____ **Date** _____

Story _____

Main Character:

Character Clues: What is the main character like?

Reactions: How does the main character *react* or *feel* about important events in the story?

Problems: Name the problems or conflicts. Circle the *main* problem.

Attempts: How do the characters *try* to solve the problem?

Resolution: How does the main problem *get solved*?

Theme: What is the author trying to say?

Fig. 1. Sample Story Grammar Notesheet

explained how she found the answers to each of the story grammar questions. Within a few days, the students began to answer some of the questions on their own. Day after day, students were presented with a coherent system for analyzing a story (i.e., a scaffold). Gradually, the teacher faded the amount of assistance provided.

In both studies, low-performing students showed significant growth in comprehension on a wide range of measures. These studies demonstrated that story grammar could be combined with research-based teaching techniques to develop a coherent instructional strategy for improving the comprehension of low-performing students.

Research with High School Students

The success of these studies led us to see whether we could improve the abilities of low-performing high school students to understand and analyze literature. The first of two studies conducted (Gurney 1987) was essentially an intensive case study of several learning disabled students, many of whom were reading between three and six years below grade level. The study demonstrated that story grammar intervention significantly improved the comprehension of these students. From this study, we learned that for students at such a low level, it is important to include oral reading of the stories in each lesson. We also found that the students responded quite positively to the consistency of the story grammar strategy.

The next step was a larger scale study (Dimino 1988) conducted with 32 high school freshmen and sophomores in Basic English, a course for students who could not deal with the rigors of typical high school English. Most, but not all, the students were reading well below grade level; reading scores ranged from 5.2 to 10.1. Prior to the intervention, we gave the students two short stories to read and a series of questions to answer. They answered only about half the questions correctly.

Children, even as young as age six, demonstrate rudimentary story grammar and use their knowledge of how stories are structured to help them remember important details.

The students were randomly assigned into either a story grammar group or a traditional group. Each group received literature instruction for one month, co-taught by a pair of teachers. Both groups used the same short stories selected from junior and senior high school literature anthologies. All the stories included a problem or conflict.

In the traditional group, the procedures in the teacher's guide to the literature textbooks were the foundation for each lesson. The teacher introduced each story by defining pertinent vocabulary noted in the teacher's guide and discussing background information to promote interest. Students then read the story. After reading, the group discussed the questions in the teacher's guide. Independent seatwork followed.

In the story grammar group, instruction focused on the seven story grammar elements shown in Figure 1, a sample student note sheet. During the first few lessons, the teacher explained the story grammar elements and then demonstrated how to apply them to a series of short stories. Essentially, the teacher "thought aloud." Using the story grammar note sheet, the teacher explained to the students the basis for the decisions made.

During the first lesson, the teacher focused on the four easiest, most literal story grammar elements (statement of problem, specification of main character, description of attempts, and resolution). Beginning with the second story, the teacher began to introduce more subtle and complex elements (character clues, reactions). The purpose of these early lessons was to illustrate the process of determining the story grammar elements and to demonstrate their internal relationships.

By the third lesson, students began to volunteer information. They did not want the teacher to tell them the main problem, character, or attempts. The teacher solicited responses from the group and recorded the responses on an overhead transparency version of the note sheet. Still, for the more difficult elements—theme, reactions, character clues—the students needed a good deal of guidance from the teacher.

As instruction progressed, students filled out their own note sheets as they read, and the teacher served mainly as a facilitator. As students read the stories orally, the teacher stopped at designated points to ask about story grammar elements. The teacher was careful to use consistent language throughout the entire unit. When the teacher stopped the oral reading at specified points, he or she used the same wording to elicit information on specific story grammar elements.

Students experienced few problems with the literal story grammar elements. Most could readily state who the main character was, specify the major problem, describe the character's attempts to solve it, and tell how the story ended. Therefore, the focus of instruction shifted to the more subtle elements—character clues, reactions, and themes.

At first, the teacher used vivid examples to exemplify the difficult concepts. For example, to demonstrate what a character clue is, the teacher said: "If I walked into the room, threw my books on the desk, and said, 'I want you to sit down and keep your mouths shut,' how would you think I felt?" The class then discussed the character clues in that day's story and made inferences about the character's reactions to events in the story.

Determining themes was by far the most difficult aspect of this instruction. The teacher modeled how to generate a theme by reviewing all the story grammar elements on the note sheet and then trying to state the author's intent. She or he indicated that there could be more than one theme for a story but that any theme provided must be justified by the story grammar elements.

The themes initially generated by the students were either overly concrete or clichéd. For example, students read a story about how a father, who was a frustrated athlete, forced his son to become a runner. The story documented the son's resentment. A typical theme offered by students was that "parents shouldn't make their kids run if they don't want to." Students had great difficulty organizing events and reactions and coming up with a statement that captured the underlying meaning of the work. When students did try to be more abstract, they often came up with clichés and morals such as "never tell a lie" and "crime does not pay."

The teacher used three techniques to assist the students in formulating a theme. First, before asking students to determine the theme, the teacher reviewed themes from previous stories to illustrate how the events in the story can be used to develop a *general* statement about what the author was trying to say. Second, the teacher provided a few examples of overly concrete themes, and the group discussed why they would not be appropriate. Third, the teacher provided a series of prompts that helped guide students to a more conceptual level.

As the intervention continued, the students seemed to begin to realize that the study of literature could be exciting. The stories became more that just a series of events to be memorized to pass a test or complete a written assignment. They began to read with an investigative, analytic stance.

An example that illustrates this emerging stance and the quality of peer interactions occurred during the discussion of themes for de Maupassant's *The Necklace*. One boy said the author was trying to tell us that we should not show off or try to lead people to believe we are rich. His theme hit on a major motif in the story. However, almost immediately, another student said she had a better theme: "The author was telling us that it's better to tell the truth." The student justified her response with the following rationale: if Mathilde had told the truth to the woman who lent her the "diamond" necklace, she would not have ruined her life paying for the replacement. More discussion ensued regarding the relative merits of the two themes.

Story grammar provides students with a system for analyzing stories that prompts them to work at a deeper conceptual level.

Dimino found that the story grammar students performed significantly better than students in the traditional group on a range of measures. These included answering questions taken from basal texts, answering questions derived from the story grammar elements, and generating written three- to four-sentence summaries of the essential elements of stories read. The effects were maintained over time. Strongest effects were found in the articulation of themes and in the quality of the summaries written.

The Whole Story

The research has consistently demonstrated that story grammar instruction can have a positive impact on students' comprehension of literature, particularly that of low-performing students. It also serves as a point of departure for spontaneous discussion of more subtle issues. Some caveats are in order, though. First, story grammar applies to many stories, but not all. It is appropriate only for stories with a clear conflict or problem. In each study, finding an appropriate array of stories was a time-consuming task. Individuals interested in using this approach may want to work in teams to select stories.

Second, not all teachers easily adapt to this approach. Some teachers are initially reluctant to "think out loud"; others have problems breaking everything into small steps. We have found that the use of fairly detailed teacher's guides for the first series of lessons helps teachers become comfortable with this teaching style.

These caveats aside, an important advantage of this type of instruction for low-performing students is that comprehension—not accurate oral reading—is always the major goal of instruction. At times in the studies, the teacher read the stories aloud to the students. At other times, students took turns reading, but the teacher never stressed word attack skills. For many of these students, this experience was a rarity. So often their instruction is limited to specific skills or literal comprehension. Our examination of the accompanying questions from the basal reading anthologies found that almost all were literal and that many focused on small details. If nothing else, story grammar can be used as a system for developing and selecting questions to accompany stories in readers and anthologies.

In addition, story grammar—whether presented as a visual map, a note sheet, or a series of simple questions repeated day after day—provides students with a system for analyzing stories that prompts them to work at a deeper conceptual level. As one student poignantly described the experience, "I learned a lot in this class—I didn't used to read the whole story, but now I do." Instruction that doesn't motivate low-performing students to read the "whole story" is doing them a great disservice.□

References

Applebee, A.N., J.L. Langer, and I.V.S. Mullis. (1988). *Who Reads Best?* Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service.

Carnine, D., and B.D. Kinder. (1985).

"Teaching Low-Performing Students to Apply Generative and Schema Strategies to Narrative and Expository Material." *Remedial and Special Education* 6, 1: 20-30.

Dimino, J.A. (1988). "The Effects of a Story Grammar Comprehension Strategy on Low-Performing Students' Ability to Comprehend Short Stories." Doctoral diss., University of Oregon–Eugene.

Gersten, R., and D. Carnine. (April 1986). "Direct Instruction in Reading Comprehension." *Educational Leadership* 43, 7: 70-78.

Goodlad, J.I., and J. Oakes. (February 1988). "We Must Offer Equal Access to Knowledge." *Educational Leadership* 45, 5: 16-22.

Gurney, ' .E. (1987). "Teaching Mildly Handicapped High-School Students to Understand Short Stories Using a Story Grammar Comprehension Strategy." Doctoral diss., University of Oregon–Eugene.

Idol, L., and V. Croll. (1987). "Story Mapping Training as a Means of Improving Reading Comprehension." *Learning Disabilities Quarterly* 10, 3: 214-230.

Mandler, J.M., and N.S. Johnson. (1977). "Remembrance of Things Parsed: Story Structure and Recall." *Cognitive Psychology* 9: 111-151.

Palincsar, A.S. (1986). "The Role of Dialogue in Providing Scaffolded Instruction." *Educational Psychologist* 21, 1 and 2: 73-98.

Rosenshine, B. (1986). "Synthesis of Research on Explicit Teaching." *Educational Leadership* 12: 85-92.

Singer, H., and D. Donlan. (1982). "Active Comprehension: Problem-Solving Schema with Question G-neration for Comprehension of Complex Short Stories." *Reading Research Quarterly* 17, 2: 166-185.

Stein, N.L., and T. Trabasso. (1982). "What's in a Story? An Approach to Comprehension and Instruction." In *Advances in Instructional Psychology*, vol. 2, edited by R. Glaser, pp. 213-267. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Thorndyke, P.W. (1977). "Cognitive Structures in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse." *Cognitive Psychology* 9: 77-110.

Russell Gersten is Associate Professor, Division of Teacher Education, College of Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1215. **Joseph Dimino** is Program Specialist, Long Beach Unified School District, 255 E. 8th St., Long Beach, CA 90813.