

# Using Narrative Texts to Teach Reading

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## บทคัดย่อ

ผู้สอนการอ่านสามารถใช้เรื่องเล่าเพื่อเพิ่มพูนความสามารถในการอ่านภาษาอังกฤษของนิสิต เนื่องจากเรื่องเล่ามีโครงสร้างเรื่องที่คล้ายคลึงกัน นิสิตจึงสามารถเข้าใจเรื่องได้ง่าย นอกจากนี้จุดประสงค์ของเรื่องเล่าคือเพื่อความเพลิดเพลิน ดังนั้นนิสิตจึงรู้สึกสนุกสนานกับการอ่าน ทำให้แรงจูงใจในการอ่านของนิสิตเพิ่มขึ้น และความสามารถในการอ่านดีขึ้นด้วย อีกทั้งผู้สอนการอ่านยังใช้เรื่องเล่าสอนคุณธรรมและช่วยให้นิสิตมีจินตนาการ เพื่อช่วยให้นิสิตมีความสามารถในการอ่านสูงขึ้น ผู้สอนควรจัดกิจกรรมในชั้นเรียนเป็นสามขั้น ได้แก่ กิจกรรมก่อนการอ่าน กิจกรรมระหว่างการอ่าน และกิจกรรมหลังการอ่าน กิจกรรมก่อนการอ่านได้แก่ 1) การสร้างความรู้พื้นฐานเกี่ยวกับเรื่องที่อ่าน 2) การคาดเดา 3) การอ่านเรื่องบางส่วนให้นิสิตฟังก่อนที่นิสิตจะอ่านเอง และ 4) กิจกรรมสร้างแผนภูมิจากคำหลัก กิจกรรมระหว่างการอ่านได้แก่ 1) การใช้กระดาษโน้ต 2) “ถูก หรือ ผิด” 3) การเติมคำลงในแผนภูมิ 4) การเล่าเรื่องอีกครั้ง และ 5) การสร้างภาพ กิจกรรมหลังการอ่าน ได้แก่ 1) การตั้งคำถาม 2) การอภิปราย 3) การเขียน 4) กิจกรรมที่เกี่ยวกับศิลปะที่ไม่ใช้คำพูด และ 5) การแต่งขยายเรื่องของตนเอง

Nowadays, reading becomes a necessary skill to be successful in our life. As Samut Senchaowanij (2543) writes, since the second half of the twentieth century, reading is the most important skill. The person who has high reading ability seems to have principles that lead them to succeed. On the other hand, as Richek; Caldwell; Jennings & Lerner (1996) writes, society suffers when citizens cannot read adequately. The unemployed, high school dropouts, the poor, and those convicted of crimes are comprised of many with low reading levels. Similarly, reading skills are significant for students to complete their study; however, not every student can succeed. Also, present-day curricula require more reading and in some cases more difficult reading than formerly. Furthermore, as methods for testing the abilities of students have increased, the reading abilities have become more required. Students are assigned to read more outside the class.

In Thailand, students need to read texts not only in Thai, their own language, but also in English, their foreign language. However, many studies proved that most Thai students have poor English reading skills. Suan-chai Chaibunruang; Yaowarat Karnphanit; & Tawatchai Chaibunruang (1993) found that a large number of students had negative attitudes toward studying English, and they had problems reading English text. Kanitha Liamsakul (1998: 2) pointed out that Thai students have difficulty remembering vocabulary and understanding sentences. As Alderson (2000) states, despite this specific need for reading in English, it is common that most students fail to learn to read adequately in English. Very frequently, students reading in English seem to read with less understanding than one might expect them to have, and to read considerable slower than they reportedly read in their first languages (1).

Students with reading problems have difficulty in both studying and their personality. According to Richek; Caldwell; Jennings; & Lerner (1996), students with reading problems in school are passive learners, have low self-esteem, emotional problems, poor attention and concentration, have difficulty making and keeping friends, and lack motivation. Because of these deficiencies, a remedial or corrective instruction is necessary in order to help students succeed in their English reading. According to Alderson (2000: 53), poor first and second-language reader lack motivation to read or to spend time improving their ability to read. Narrative texts, or texts that tell stories, can be used to improve students' reading abilities.

## Why Narratives?

Narrative text is one popular and common form of writing. In narratives, stories are told and plots unfold. Narratives have characters and plot with a sequence of events. While most are fiction such as **Charlotte's Web** by White, some chronicle real-life events such as **The House on the Mango Street** by Casandra. Narratives are written according to forms, or story grammars. Story grammar is similar to sentence grammar in that it attempts to explain the various components in a story and how they function. The story grammar includes characters, a setting, events, and a conclusion. This conclusion illuminates the theme of the story. As Rosenblatt (1978) explains, most well-written stories, whether simple or complex, have a fairly similar structure, and most children have a basic schema for this structure. Therefore, they can easily understand narrative texts.

Narrative texts can be used to improve students' motivation in reading. According to Alderson (2000: 63-65), what causes difficulty in texts is the way the text is written; it styles or

features that make one text different from another. Expository texts are harder to process than narrative texts. The structures associated with stories (story grammars) seem to facilitate comprehension by allowing readers to quickly construct a model of the text. In addition, narrative texts appear to induce visualisation in readers as part of the reading process. In other words, readers can see scenes in their head when they read narrative texts. The visualization helps readers understand texts easier, and readers did not feel discouraged. Furthermore, one purpose of narrative texts is to entertain. Readers enjoy reading texts and are excited to know what will happen next. In this way, narrative texts can help increase students' motivation.

Moreover, many narratives contain morals and themes. For example, fables are short stories followed by an important moral point. According to Pearson and Fielding (1991), students benefit from reading narrative texts. Therefore, reading instructors can use narratives to teach moral lessons.

In addition, narratives inspire imagination. According to Pearson and Fielding (1991), narratives are written to inspire personal responses. Through stories, readers leave the limits of their everyday lives and “travel” to the prairie of Virginia with Jim Burden in **My Antonia** (by Cather), or to Wallowa valley in **Thunder Rolling in the Mountains** (by Scoth O’Dell and Elizabeth Hall). In this way, readers learn to represent people, objects, and events in their imagination (Graesser; Golding; & Long. 1991). Thus cognitive growth is fostered by an imaginative experience. Students become involved in narratives they read and put themselves in the character’s place, asking themselves, “What would I do if I were this character?” Most students have personal responses to the stories: typically, I disliked the story; it was O.K.; I liked it; I loved it. When instructors ask them their reaction, instructors honor their opinions, focus on enjoyment, and raise self-esteem (Richek; Caldwell; Jennings; & Lerner. 1996: 157). In this way, instructors can foster students’ higher-level thinking and imagination through narrative texts.

## Narrative genres

Narrative genres include:

1. Realistic fiction, such as tales about children
2. Fantasy
3. Fairy tales, folk tales, and tall tales

4. Fables
5. Mysteries
6. Humor, language play
7. Historical fiction, set in a period in the past
8. Plays
9. Narrative poetry, poems that tell stories
10. Real-life adventures
11. Biographies and autobiographies

## How Can Reading Instructors Teach Students to Comprehend Narrative Texts?

According to Richek; Caldwell; Jennings; & Lerner (1996: 156), activities that reading instructors should employ to help students improve reading abilities are:

*Before Reading.* Instructors help students relate background information to reading, build students' background information, gently correct misperceptions, and mention something students might enjoy or learn from the material.

*During Reading.* Instructors encourage silent reading, ask students to predict what will happen next, and encourage students to monitor their own comprehension while reading.

*After Reading.* Instructors check comprehension and encourage active responses.

Similarly, the above activities can be well applied to teaching students to read narrative texts. That is, the activities are divided into three stages: before, during, and after.

### Before Reading

In his study, Durkin (1978-9, Winter) found that the first part of a reading lesson is the most crucial, yet the most neglected. There are three specific activities that instructors can use: building background knowledge, prediction, and reading a selection to students before they read it for themselves, and webbing and weaving.

### 1. Building background knowledge.

Since background knowledge greatly influences comprehension, it is important to help students to have specific concepts in a story before they read it. How can we do that? Before students read, instructor can provide students with factual information such as the information from an encyclopedia. Reading students factual information, instructors remind them of what they know about a topic and supply them with new information. Furthermore, this activity helps increase students' vocabulary that students will meet in the story they read.

Asking questions is also a method to build students background knowledge. Instructors might begin the class by asking students what they know about a subject or a topic. For example, to prepare students to read "My Name" by Cisneros, instructors might ask the meaning of their name. This will increase students' interest in the story.

### 2. Prediction

Prediction what a story will be about before reading increases students' involvement in the story dramatically. To help students to predict, instructors might write the title of the story or selection on the board and ask students what they think the story will be about. For example, students might say that **Daddy-Long-Leg** (by Webster) probably involves a father.

Instructors might give students a list of key words from the story and ask students to work in groups. Using the given words from the list, students compose a story. After finishing their story, they read the story and compare the two versions. Instructors might ask them which story they prefer.

### 3. Reading a selection to students

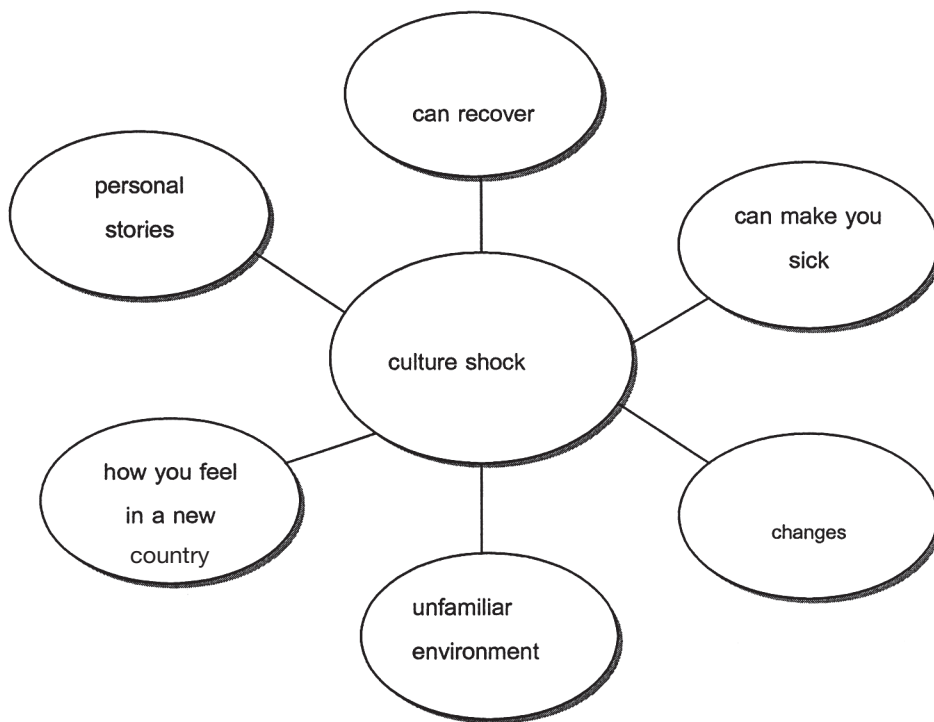
For low-achieving students, instructors might read a story to students before they read by themselves. This will help students learn the story format, sequence of events and many words before their reading. However, this activity is effective if instructors ask students to predict what will happen next while they are listening. It is important to note that students must have their chance to read the story by themselves later.

This activity can also help increase students involvement. Instructors read a few paragraphs of exciting stories to students. After students feel interested in the story, they read the story independently.

#### 4. Webbing and Weaving

Webbing and Weaving are procedures that instructors and students can use together or that students can use on their own to organize ideas and graphically show their interrelatedness. Webbing makes use of a graphic organizer that looks like a spider web--thus its name. The web connects a central topic to a variety of related ideas and events, as shown in the web in Figure 1. Webbing can be used with students of any age before reading a selection to their prior knowledge. The thought processes involved in organizing concepts by making connections between them prepare students to make similar connections when they meet the ideas in the texts. The concept or concepts that are webbed should be of central idea of the texts.

**Figure 1** Sample web



Similarly, a weave is a graphic organizer. However, a weave is different from a web by highlighting comparison. It focuses on differences and similarities; for example in figure 2, students will find the similarities and differences between two characters.

**Figure 2** Sample weave comparing Antonia to Shimerdas.

	<b>Antonia</b>	<b>Mr. Shimerdas</b>
strong	yes	no
thoughtful	yes	yes
nice	yes	yes
smart	yes	yes
nostalgic	sometimes	yes

### During Reading

Many activities encourage understanding and enjoyment while students are reading.

#### 1. Post-it Note

According to Caldwell (1993), the Post-it Note activity gives students the opportunity to “talk back” to authors as they are reading. The “Post-it-notes,” pieces of paper with one sticky edge, can be easily placed on text, removed, and reused. Using small notes helps students to remark the precise part of the reading they are reacting to. Each student will receive three types of the Post-it notes:

- a. An exclamation point to indicate that he/she has been surprised by something.
- b. A “smiley face” to show that he/she likes something in the story.
- c. A question mark to note a question that he/she has about something in the story.

Instructors give each student three of each type. While reading, students place a Post-it note wherever they feel surprised, they like, and they do not understand. After they read, instructors can use the Post-it notes as the starting point to discuss the story.

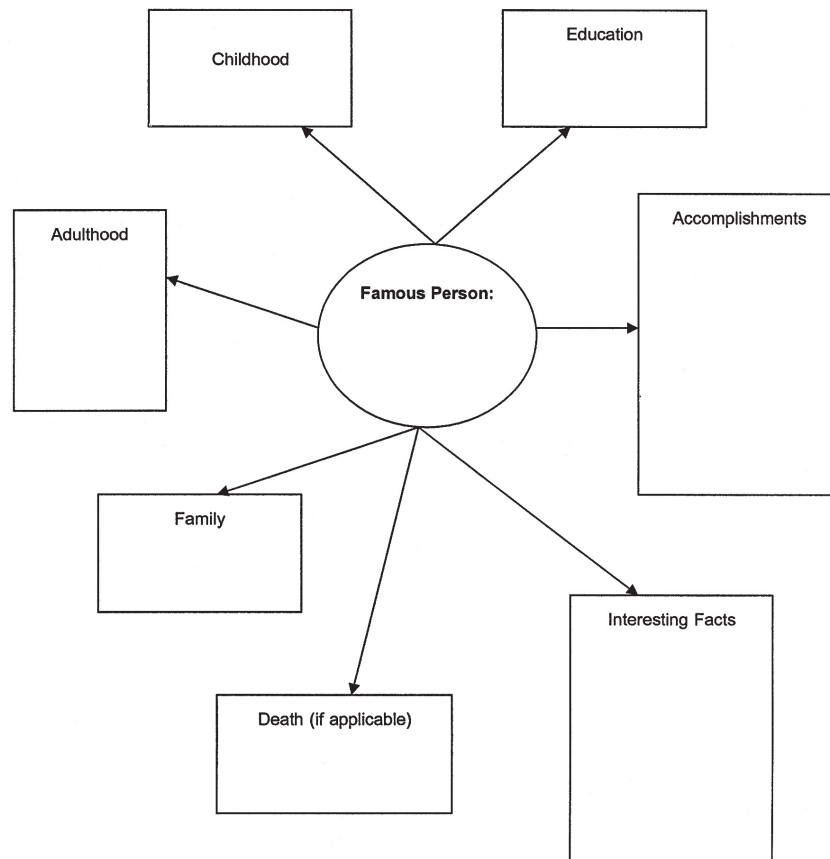
#### 2. “True/False?”

“True/False?” is an activity that can develop skimming and scanning skills. Instructors make up True/False questions for the selected narrative text. Then instructors ask students to read the selected text and put students into pairs and ask them to answer the True/False questions (they can have only one answer for each question). When students complete the exercise, discuss the answer as a class.

### 3. Completing a Chart

Completing a chart can be an enjoyable activity for students while reading. Narrative texts have time, place, and action. Students not only understand the information but also are able to reconstruct it chronologically. Instructors either write a chart on the board for students, or reproduce it as a handout. Then they ask their students to read texts and complete the chart either individually or in pairs. After students finish their chart, instructors have them compare their chart. Instructors complete the chart on the board following the directions students give them. At this stage, it is important to comment on different words used to fill in the chart. While filling the chart, students reconstruct the story and this allows students to discuss their own interpretation. For example, students are assigned to read an autobiography and asked to fill in the following chart.

**Figure 3** Sample chart



### 4. Retelling a Story

Retelling a story can help students gain insight into a narrative text. Through this activity, students construct the story in their mind and show how the story is organized and what information



is important. Instructors inform students that they will retell a story to you (or to the class) after reading. Then ask students to read the story silently. After students finish reading the story, say “Tell me about the story as if you were telling it to a person who had never read it.” It is important to note that instructors must not interrupt as the story is told. Generally, retelling a story should include the presence of the major characters and the major events presented in chronological order.

#### 5. Making Mental Images

Another effective activity is “Making Mental Images.” According to Pressley and Harris (1990), developing mental imagery in response to reading can improve students’ comprehension and interest. In addition, this activity helps students feel comfortable when they read a text without pictures because they create pictures in their mind. When students form mental images as they read, they combine their background knowledge with the text. Reading becomes more personal and relevant as they construct the images. This activity can be used at several points in a story. For example, instructors ask for a mental image after students have read the first few paragraphs; this will help students to make the rest of the story more vivid. Instructors may ask for images at places in the story such as the valley in **The Thunder Rolling in the Mountain**. Instructors can also ask students to focus on the most important or exciting part of a story and to describe it to the class. It is both enjoyable and instructive for students to compare their mental images as no two people see precisely the same thing.

### After Reading

Graves; Juel; & Graves (2004: 287) says that post-reading activities encourage students to do something with the material they have just read, to think--critically, logically, and creatively--about the information and ideas that emerge from their reading, to respond to what they read. According to Grabe (2000), reading should be taught in the context of a content-centered integrated skills curriculum, since content provides motivation and integration reinforces learning. After students read narrative texts, instructors can integrate listening, speaking, and writing with the reading of narrative texts. According to Day (1993: 201), integrating these skills with the reading of texts give students the opportunity to interpret text through individual cultural perspectives and compare these perspectives with those of their classmates and the authors. Activities after reading can take a variety of forms: questioning, discussion, writing, drama, and artistic and nonverbal activities.

### 1. Questioning

Questioning activities encourage students to think about and respond to the information and ideas in the narrative texts they have read. Questions can promote thinking on a number of levels. Questions can be various kinds, but it is important to note that some of them should give students opportunity to engage in higher-level thinking. As Guthrie; & Anderson (1999: 68) write, “Students want to raise questions about literature and life, and teachers who encourage these questions will improve students’ reading.”

### 2. Discussion

Discussion is exchanging ideas out loud. The intent is to freely explore ideas, to learn something new or gain a different perspective by pooling the information or insights that more than one person can give. Discussion can involve the entire class, small groups, or pairs. According to Graves; Juel; & Graves (2004: 290), when students are assigned to discuss in small groups, the positive effect accrue. Discussion activities can enhance text recall, aesthetic response to text, and reading comprehension. As Monson (1992) suggests, narrative texts generates and communicates ideas--ideas that humans need to survive, to make strides personally and collectively.

### 3. Writing

Writing is a powerful way to integrate what students already know with the information presented in the narrative texts. Writing also provides opportunities for students to extend ideas, to explore new ways of thinking, doing, and seeing. There are many forms of writing activities: personal responses, journals or letters. For example, after reading a story about a friend like **My Antonia**, students might write about their own friends. However, it should be noted that writing activities should relate to the initial purposes of the texts students have read.

### 4. Drama

Drama activities can also encourage students to extend existing meaning they have constructed with a narrative text and to generate new ones. Moreover, drama can be an enjoyable activity that can motivate students to like reading. According to Grabe (2000), students can learn reading better when they work in groups. In postreading drama activities, students work together to improvise or to plan out and enact something they have read. These activities don’t require an audience, they can be prepared and enacted by students for themselves.

### 5. Artistic and Nonverbal Activities

While the four above mentioned activities have some way involved words, artistic and nonverbal activities take into account those mode of expression that are not verbal. This category includes the visual arts, music, and dance. Also, students might enjoy making visual representations of information-graphs, maps, charts, trees, and diagram. In addition, students might be assigned to make audiotapes or videos. These activities show students that language can be transformed and that ideas can be seen, heard, and felt.

### 6. “Making their own story”

“Making their own story” is another enjoyable activity. Instructors select a narrative text and omit the ending. After finishing pre-reading and during-reading activities, students are assigned to fill in the ending in groups. This activity can include oral presentations and additional reading. For example, after students finish their ending, instructors have them present this ending to the class.

## Sample Lesson

In “A sharp, Beribboned Message to Abusive Husbands,” Joe Murray tells a story of a young woman who married a man whom everybody thought was good. However, he abused her, and her neighbors did nothing to help her. Finally, she killed her husband but was not punished. Then she married again and the same thing happened: she was abused by her new husband.

### Activities before reading

- Discuss the following questions.

1. Do you know the word “abuse”? What does it mean?
2. If you read newspapers or watch television, you know that a serious social problem in the United States is spousal abuse. What is spousal abuse? Is this a problem in your own country? What do you think can be done to prevent domestic violence?
3. Sometimes writers will deal with serious subjects in a humorous manner. What are their purposes? Is it a good method? Do you know some humorist writers?

### Activities during reading

- Ask students to read the text and find the answer to the following questions.

1. What do you think prompt Joe Murray to write this column? Do you think the story the author relates is true? Why or why not?
2. Why wasn't the woman prosecuted for murdering her first husband? The author writes that the people who knew she murdered her husband "were no less guilty than she." Explain.
3. What makes this column humorous? The subject matter? The end of the story? The manner in which the writer narrates the story? Explain your answer. Give some examples to show the writer's humor? Do you like his humor? Why or why not?
4. In paragraph 3, Joe Murrey writes, "it was an uneven match." What does he mean? Do you agree with him?
  - When students finish their reading, ask them to compare their ideas with their partners.
  - Discuss the above questions as a class.

#### **Activities after reading**

The last paragraph--the ending--of the story has been deleted. Ask student to work in groups of four, write their own ending and then read it to the class.

### **Conclusion**

As Richek ; Caldwell ; Jennings : & Lerner (1996) point out, educators, parents and psychologists, as well as society in general, share a common concern about reading problems, but the primary responsibility for teaching reading belongs to teaching professionals. Therefore, it is the duty of reading instructors to help students cope with this difficulty, to read better, and to enjoy reading. Narrative texts have a similar structure, so most students can easily understand them. This helps them enjoy their reading and their motivation. As a result, reading instructors can use narrative texts to improve students reading ability. The activities in class are also significant; instructors can divide the activities into three stages: before, during, and after. However, it is important to note that the relationship between students and instructors is crucial. Building rapport includes accepting students, providing a secure environment and helping students to feel successful.

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