
STRUCTURAL READING FLUENCY THROUGH UNSTRUCTURED TEXT

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Abstract

The teacher often is critical about the structured (I mean designed by one and used by the other) syllabi prescribed and allotted to them in a top-bottom approach. They strongly believe that it offer a little space for creativity. Teacher, more or less, needs to follow the structure. This often forces the teacher to treat the syllabus as an end in itself. Similarly, attention to language skills is often taken for granted while achieving the objective of completion of syllabus. I experience this quite an often in my undergraduate classes. Interestingly, the prescribed material, time frame, learner and teacher autonomy, assessment and evaluation procedures, etc. offer a little space to the teacher to pay exclusive attention to LSRW. Nonetheless, the teacher may utilize the space and time frame allotted by tapping his/her creative side. He/she may link the prescribed lesson with an activity with possibilities of flexibility to prioritize a language skill/s. Structural Reading Fluency (hereafter SRF) as a technique specifically prioritizes three components of language; learning of structure/tense, silent/loud reading and marks of punctuation. The teacher may either discuss these together or separately depending upon the possibility available and the need of the class. The author wants to share his experience of using unstructured but graded text to develop structural reading fluency of first year students of Bachelor of Commerce.

Key words: SRF, Text, Creativity, Language Skills, Autonomy

Introduction

SRF as a technique creates authentic scope for students to achieve fluency in learning to read, learn to identify and use appropriate structural patterns, and learn and make appropriate use of marks of punctuation through successive sessions. In a seminal book 'Structural Reading' the authors (Catherine Stern, Toni S. Gould and Margaret B. 1984) talk about how to read and understand structures. They advocate use of analyzing structures to understand the working of patterns. Such analysis helps the reader understand the logical intranet among elements. In one of the researches, Meyer and Freedle (1984) found how difference in structures of rhetorical prose has effects upon reading comprehension. Meyer calls it the "content structure"(1977a:307), or the way the information in a passage is organized. It is an important factor in reading comprehension.

Putting together, structural reading offers learners of a foreign language some help to achieve fluency in reading.

Target Components

I used the activity to help students have practice in reading fluency through reading for structural clarity. As students move on reading the unstructured text/s they tend to grab the style of the given text. This helps them organize the way/s they try to comprehend the text. In the present classroom experience, the students in pairs made efforts to put the unstructured lines into a paragraph with structural clarity ensuring coherence. Practice of silent reading, learn to spell words, sentence structure are the concurrent items to pay attention to.

Participants

The students were the first year undergraduates of Commerce stream. They were 30 students in the class on the day the activity was used. They were between 17 to 20 years of age. They studied English as a foreign but compulsory language on the curriculum. They exhibit language competence approximately at A2 level. They were accustomed to reading the teacher by the teacher and answer the comprehension questions at the end by the students.

Instructional materials

I preferred short story as a handy instructional tool. Short story has always been useful in language class. It is easily available and students love to read them. It offers sequence of events thus keeps students' interest intact while reading. It exhibits less structural complexity and consequently motivates students to keep going. Initially, I selected and edited 20 short stories but used 15 of them. The gradation was done to suit the level of the class. The gradation process was carried out by me since I was in touch with the students for more than eight months; I thought I could better judge their competence level. It included word substitution (from technical term to more concrete one), striking balance among frequently used sentence structures; a few simple, complex, and tense in the sentences. Short story offers an average level of difficulty to match the level of competence students have. The list of the stories is given at the end. The activity had three sessions. Read the given text. Share with others. Answer comprehension questions.

In class

The activity is a pair activity. I used it in one of my undergraduate classes (First year Bachelor of Commerce). The students study English as a foreign language and a compulsory subject in the curriculum. There were 30 students in the class. They were put into 15 pairs. I gave a sheet to each pair. The sheet consisted of a group of connected lines of a short story. I elaborated on the clues (punctuation, tense, reading tone) to look at while establishing structural appropriateness. They were to put the connected lines into proper structural order. I offered them twenty minutes to try this. Then, I collected the sheets, shuffled them and redistributed them to the pairs ensuring that the pair did not get its own story to review. Again, the pairs had 20 minutes to go through the text and see its structural

appropriateness. The pair could mark changes, if necessary. This could help the teacher to put students in peer interaction and have exchange of ideas among students. It works like a task for students in pairs to complete before other pairs do it. Successful completion makes it an enjoyable learning experience. The teacher may prioritize a component (tense/spelling/reading/verb/pronoun/etc.) based on the topic of classroom interaction and teacher's intention.

Feedback

At the end of the session the pairs got a feedback questionnaire. It had three questions on comprehension three questions on sentence structure and a question on cues to identify the sentence. The teacher/author wanted to see how the technique of SRF worked upon students' comprehension of the given text. Following were the questions.

What is the theme of the story?

What may be the topic sentence of the story?

Suggest a suitable title for the story.

Which sentences in the story have simple structure?

Which sentences in the story have compound structure?

Which sentences in the story have complex structure?

What cues helped you identify a sentence?

The purpose of the feedback was to check if students were able to strike relationship between comprehension of the story and its structural organization.

Thus, the activity was placed into following stages.

- The pair reading the given text silently.
- It tries to put the connected lines into possible sentences.
- It also marks the structure of sentences.
- It makes an appropriate use of structural markers.
- It shares the structured text with other pairs.
- Finally answers the feedback questions.

Challenges

- The activity was organized in pairs thus individual attention was not possible.
- There could have been a balanced combination of slow and advanced students in pairs.
- The time for reading the story was found less.
- Teacher instructions may be decreased for increased student involvement.

Conclusion

Structural reading fluency as a technique was used for undergraduate students in their first year to improve their reading of an English text. A text of a short story was used. The activity lasted for 90 minutes. This made a significant impact upon students' understanding of the texts. They were able to answer all the questions confidently. In the long run, the technique may be used at length to see its variation and degree of impact upon other components of language learning.

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