

# Teaching Narrative Structures to Students majoring in Pre-School and Primary Education

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**Abstract.** In the context of teaching English as a second language to young and very young learners, future teachers need to find indirect ways to teach. Narrative structures in children's literature and short films could be some tools to develop creativeness in future teachers. This research paper is based on the methodology used to teach students, majoring in Pre-school and Primary Education, through narrative structures and their practical application. This study is designed to prove that teaching narrative structures is a very effective tool to develop English language teaching strategies for the above-mentioned students.

**Keywords.** Narrative Structures - Pre-School - Primary Education - English Language Teaching - Storytelling

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## 1. Introduction

When approaching a course on English Literature, for students in their 5<sup>th</sup> year and majoring in Pre-school and Primary Education, there are some narrative structures which are key to construct stories for children. Those structures may be very useful to create story that is designed for classroom teaching. According to Mart (2012) "Stories are motivating to young learners, and stories can create a happy and enjoyable learning environment. Stories are the most ideal sources for young learners in effective language learning. Children like stories, and they find stories easy to access and understand. Stories provide an outstanding opportunity for young learners to master the foreign language" (p. 105). One of the problems a children's teacher writer must face when writing a story is the need to shorten the stories. One of the challenges is to keep identity construction, so that the reader can feel identified with some of the characteristics of the story's protagonist. In this way, children's books are a transmitter tool that has been used in our cultures for many years, since tales have an educational behavior that influence on people's identity construction (Ros-Garcia, 2013). As Koutsompou (2015) clearly explains "This genuineness in learning leaves a lasting impact on the students' mind. The dialogic nature of literary pieces paves the way for individual learner's response to a particular piece of literature that ensures his or her use of creative faculty, of course through language. Such learning drives away the monotony of traditional language classes. Thus, it gives the teacher an opportunity to open a

broad context of language use for the students” (p. 75). These tools and ideas will pull children’s behaviors and accompany them for a long time (Trepanier-Street & Romatowsky, 1999). Children enjoy being read and told short stories repeatedly. So, usually, there are many ideas, many descriptive situations, many feelings of the protagonist to be explained and an enormous difficulty to convey them to young children in a short way. Therefore, considering Truby’s (2007) capacity for structure analysis and Macià’s (2014) explanation of short film structures, an interdisciplinary approach to English language teaching was created and, consequently, a new method for teacher’s creativeness. Cinema is an art form that has chosen to be narrative: it tells stories or arguments. Like other narrative arts (theater, novel), it is dynamic: some characters carry on events that develop, that flare, over time. It seems reasonable to think that the amount of time devoted to explaining these arguments will be a determining factor when it comes to establishing their characteristics. Since the feature film, which usually goes from ninety to one hundred and ten minutes, is the cinematic narrative form par excellence, much of the specialized bibliography on how to build an argument for an orbital film revolves around it. In this case, the study deals with the short film, which nowadays has practically one distribution channel, albeit a powerful one, that is the internet. The main aim is to establish a list of possible structural schemes for short stories, usually around a five-minute story (but it can be two or ten, the measurement is not rigid). The starting point would refer to the structures that in a way are usually given in the feature film, because they are the most easily recognizable.

Narrative structures that are successful in novels and films, usually do not fit children’s literature. Either they are too long, in the case of a novel, or, as in the case of a film, they are visual arts resources, as sound effects and visual effects, which are used for increasing suspense. So, there are some basic formulas, which are very useful when constructing stories for children and very easy to implement. This is the case of children’s narrative structures and the basic chains that define them. These basic chains are concrete formulas, which summarize the contents of the writing to be written or to be analyzed. The same situation happens when a teacher refers to a structure to be filled when teaching how to write a composition, for instance. Considering the classical structure on tales, the main problem is length. The basic narrative structure is a main character having an objective and finding some obstacles to overcome. It is a classical structure which contains three acts. However, the main characteristic of the second act is the consecutive difficulties which the main character goes through in the story. This is usually done to keep the suspense and interest of the reader or the viewer in the case of cinema. The difficulty is to find time (space) to describe these consecutive difficulties. In children’s literature the outcome may turn out to be an unsubstantial story, because there aren’t enough difficulties to be overcome by the protagonist.

Thus, the solution is to modify the classical structure to turn it into an optimal formula, a base chain for each type of plot in children’s literature, at least in early stages. Some of the structures that work for children and that will be described in this article, are the following:

1. Dramatic Response in a Causal structure
2. Rereading structure
3. Descriptive structure

4. Serpent structure
5. Change in the Main Character structure
6. Dramatic Irony structure
7. Repetition structure
8. Intimacy Process structure

## 2. Class Methodology

Discovering autonomously is one methodological approach that many researchers are dealing with. Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith (1988) assert that the role of teaching materials is to aid the learner to make efficient use of the resources in order to facilitate self-discovery (Tomlinson, 2011). As Savvidou (2004) asserts “An integrated approach to the use of literature in the language classroom offers foreign language learners the opportunity to develop not only their linguistic and communicative skills but their knowledge about language in all its discourse types”. In this sense, Ghosn (2002), offers a detailed description on what to keep in mind when selecting stories. The theme, which has to be universal and allow for a variety of spin-off activities; the storyline, which has to be clear uncomplicated with a satisfying unmelodramatic conclusion; the language, with a certain amount of predictable repetition; and the illustrations, which should be pleasing and helps for the understanding of the text (p.174).

Therefore, taking into account the researcher’s suggestions, the methodology used in class is theoretical and practical. Before starting with a specific structure, it is relevant to point out that the order of the structures presentation is a key point for them (students?) to understand the practical application. The base chain of the Causal Structure is a standard Aristotelic structure but, at the end, there is a final turning point which offers the reader the possibility of expanding the suspense and therefore in order to obtain a more substantial story after all. The Descriptive, Rereading and Repetition structures have simple base chains that are very easy to recognize in the story. Therefore, these structures come after some more complex ones, so that students will be able to fix them and the previous ones without getting lost in the writing process.

At the beginning of each session, students are presented with the *base chain* of the structure. Then, the structure is illustrated, at least, with an example taken from English literature and an example from a short film. Afterwards, both texts are analyzed from the base chain point of view and questions are solved. Finally, students start their practical work, which consists in writing a short-invented text, following the base chain provided. After writing it, they will have to decide the students’ age, the learning objective (grammar, syntax, and vocabulary), the topics dealt in the story and pre-reading, while-reading and post reading activities, as Lazar (1993) proposes as a classification for dealing with short stories. Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan (2011) offer a similar approach with explained proven results taken from Savvidou’s (2004) theories.

To complete the steps, each student will share the written story with the rest of the group. Students will read the story in silence. They will try to identify the parts of the text that fit with the base chain, and they will analyze if the structure works or not. The rest of the students will establish a debate and dialogue with the author to improve the story, the activities proposed and the learning objectives. At the end of the course, each

student will take one of the structures learnt in class and will expand it. This is, the short story will be presented as if it was taught in class, with after reading materials and activities, and all resources a teacher may have prepared for a full-fledged English class. For preschoolers, the teacher may only use the oral competency, so a reference for this specific methodology it is interesting to refer to the oral analysis of narrative structures done by Labov and Waletzky (1997). Also, Sandelowski (1991) offers an approach in reference to qualitative analysis, where narrative is presented as a framework for understanding the subject and interview data in qualitative research. Also, when dealing with what sort of story to write, students may face a challenging decision to make. Mart offers a wide-range of different approaches for the selection of children's literature topics in relation to language learning. The researcher oversees the methodology through a set of questions taken from diverse researchers, who deal with criteria when selecting stories for young learners. In this sense, Brown (2004), Steinbeck (2008), Niemann (2002) and Vardel, Hadaway and Young (2006) present a wide sort of questions to support teachers and parents of learners of English as a second language when selecting books which are appropriate in relation to age, interests and maturity (Mart, 2012, p. 102).

### 3. Narrative Structures

The Dramatic Response in a Causal structure is the classic Aristoteles structure but it offers a turning point at the end which enlarges the suspense. The reader, or listener, is encouraged by an end which is not so, and enjoys the pleasure of an alternative ending. This happens because the story is short and the rapid movement can be done with no damage to the discursive text. The base chain for this structure is the following: CLARIFICATION+FIRST CRISIS+ENDING+FINAL TURNING POINT. The books we find which fit this structure are related to the final turning point which can be from positive to negative and from negative to positive. The final turning point from positive to negative can be found in Oscar Wilde's *The Nightingale and the Rose* (1888), in which, at the end the girl refuses the rose from the student but the student goes back to his routine as if nothing (Nightingale's sacrificed death) had happened. As for visual works, "Alma" (Blass, 2009) and "The Summit" (Felipe, 2009) are examples to be analyzed in class. In the case of a final turning point from negative to positive the fable from Robert Louis Stevenson *The Touchstone* (1896), the prince discovers the terrible truth at the end but he decides to walk away thanks to the positive view of the touchstone. In terms of visual works to support this final turning point from negative to positive, "Soar" (Tzue, 2015) and "A Cloudy Lesson" (Xue, 2016) are good examples.

The Rereading structure has a very similar base chain as in the previous structure but it contains a final turning point which implies the rereading of the story because this precise turning point changes the point of view of the overall reader's experience. The base chain is the following: CLARIFICATION+FIRST CRISIS+ENDING+FINAL TURNING POINT+REREADING. A very clear written work in English literatures is Mark Twain's *The Californian's Tale* (1893) in which the final turning point encourages rereading. As for visual work, in children's literature we find Joanne Partis' *My cat Just Sleeps* (2003), in which a young girl is wondering why all cats seem very active and hers just sleeps. At the end of the story the reader can discover that the cat has a very active night

life. So, it is the time to return to the beginning of the book and change the point of view of the reader towards the cat.

The Descriptive structure dedicates its attention to describe and inform about an item or a topic. This is the objective of the description. The base chain for this structure is the following: OBJECT/SUBJECT DESCRIPTION+ IT ENDS WHEN ENOUGH DESCRIBED. The books we find which fit in this structure are books without a plot, which are informative and plenty of images, picture books. Anne Rockwell is a very sound writer of this structure. Some of her books are clearly descriptive, for example: *Library Day* (Rockwell, 2016), and *Boats* (Rockwell, 1982). In the first picture book, a child visits a library for the first time and he learns stories, reads books, magazines, and discovers that there are also movies, crafts, chess, and puppet shows. Through his day-experience, we can discover a library. In the second book, all sorts of boats are presented with different pictures. We are shown the usages, the sizes and the shapes. So, apart from introducing the boats, we are introduced to many other topics. An example of learning objective can be specific vocabulary about boats.

In Catalonia *Teo's* books (Denou, 1977) are well-known for its descriptive structure. Cinema adapts each book as a sort of cartoon-documentary for children. In these cartoons, Teo is a redheaded boy, restless and curious, and has a younger brother. Each of the stories explains his daily life in a concrete topic for children to learn: at school, at home, on vacation, and so on. CLIL books are another resource to consider when applying the descriptive structure. These are focused to primary students and, for fifth and sixth graders, the books are usually presented with photographs rather than illustrations, which are restricted mostly to younger learners. An example of this, is *Why Does Water Freeze?* (Rees, 2010), in which children are engaged in science through questions and answers. This format helps children to connect with the world around them, in a descriptive manner.

Another option for the descriptive structure is to humanize an animal, and follow its steps throughout a book, around a specific topic. This is the case, for example, of *Pete The Cat. I Love My White Shoes* (Litwin, 2010). Pete the Cat goes walking down the street with his new brand shoes and, little by little, the reader is introduced to different colors and materials. The author uses a repetitive song all through the story to keep the attention of the children. On the other hand, visual materials are very useful when working with the descriptive structure. Some cartoons are very well structured to be descriptive and repetitive. This is the case of *Peppa Pig*, a British preschool animated television series. In the episode "Cuckoo Clock" (Baker & Astley, 2018), Peppa learns what a Cuckoo Clock is. Her parents wind the clock. Her father describes the clock and the cuckoo. Both daughter and son imitate the father. They wait until nine o'clock and see the cuckoo. George misses the cuckoo so he waits for it but he gets bored and misses it again. Finally, he sees it. They see it and they repeat the bird's sound. At night, they stop the clock to sleep but they are awakened by the cuckoo at seven o'clock. Therefore, they decide to put the cuckoo inside its clock-house, wind it and visit their parents, who are fast asleep. So, in this case both children demonstrate they have learnt how to wind the cuckoo clock. The story finishes with the family laughing happily.

Also, some adapted preschool picture books, as for example the "Teo Discovers the World" (BRB, 1995), an entertaining educational series. In "Teo Travels by Plane", (BRB, 1995), Teo is going to take a plane for the first time. A presentation of the good-bye

moment with his family is shown at the beginning of the chapter. The second description is in the airport: airplanes, luggage, and plane tickets. The third description is the airplane and the seat belt, the view from the window, and what to do inside the plane and what is not allowed to do. The fourth description is a visit to the pilot with the airhostess. The following description is the landing, the meeting with family and the luggage pick-up. The last description is Teo expressing his future wishes to become an airline pilot and Teddy an airhostess.

The Serpent structure includes ellipsis and narrator and the base chain for this structure is the following: PRESENTATION+ ACTIONS OF THE PROTAGONIST (+/-5)+ OPEN ENDING. It is usually referred to a biography or a story of a process. Materials in English literature that use this structure are Mark Twain's *The Story of the bad Little boy* (1965) and John Burningham's *Granpa* (1984). The open ending helps to describe a part of a process or a part of a life of a person. The iconic symbol of the serpent is the possibility of the written story being able to be some chapters, vents, souvenirs, adventures of the protagonist which help the reader to know the main character enough. In the case of *Granpa*, for example, we find these micro stories inside the mainstream:

- Granpa has a granddaughter
- Grandpa plays with her
- Grandpa remembers a snowday
- Granpa remembers when fishing
- Granpa goes to the beach with her granddaughter
- Granpa is ill and dies

Each of these use past and present tenses to construct a biography, and each of them has some suspense to keep the reader's attention.

As for visual materials, "Harvie Krumpet" (Eliot, 2013), "Once upon a time (Larva Season 2)" (Kang, 2016), and "Abdul Kalam Story (Dinner of my life)" (KidsOne, 2015), are good examples to be analysed in class.

Change in the main character structure is focused on the behavior of the protagonist, which suddenly changes and overcomes a problem which must be solved. In this case, the base chain is the following: CHARACTERIZATION+CAUSING EVENT+CHANGE + RESOLUTION. This structure is focused on the creation of the main character. At the beginning of the class, students are asked to create a name for the character, and a problem for the protagonist. This is going to be the starting point of their story. Then, they are given some question to answer about the protagonist. It is the process of building up a character, with a personality and a life. These are the questions students must answer:

1. What is his/her name?
2. How does he/she look like?
3. When and where was he/she born?
4. Who is his/her family?
5. Where does he/she live?
6. What are his/her hobbies?
7. Is he/she extroverted or introverted?
8. Does he/she have any pets?
9. Who are his/her friends?

## 10. What makes him/her special?

*Think About Things* (Canals, 2015) goes along this structure: the plot emerges when Pete the protagonist does not want to follow the family routine, so the kitchen disappears for him. At this point, the title is also an element to consider. It may give a clue for the development of the plot, for pre-reading activities and may also give access to the discussion of the topic for a post reading debate. However, at the end he changes, and the kitchen goes back to its original placement. The structure analysis is done with the students in class:

1. The Characterization: He leaves home twice without having had breakfast, pages 6-7, 14-15 and 18.
2. The Causing Event: The kitchen disappears, pages 18-19.
3. The Change: He decides to wait for breakfast first, pages 26-27.
4. The Resolution: A learning experience for the protagonist who finally understands because he thinks about things before doing them, pages 26-27.

The learning objective, in this case, will be the Present Simple Tense, and the activities proposed should be linked to this purpose.

Moreover, cinema offers a wide diversity of examples of this structure. One short film that fits into it is “On the Same Page” (Norman & Lutz, 2015). An introverted writer in a newspaper has the repeated daily action of nothing new to report. Suddenly, a colorful neighbor appears, and an adventure starts until the grey introverted writer will learn how to write colorful news every day. The learning experience of the young writer will be to discover a world outside the four walls of the office he works at and, without even noticing, he will be inspired to change and exit his comfort zone.

The following structure is about dramatic irony and its name is Dramatic Irony structure. Dramatic irony is when the audience is aware of a situation in the plot, but the characters are not, at least one of them is not aware of the situation. Taking this into account, the base chain is the following: INSTALLATION+EXPLOITATION+RESSOLUTION. Installation of the dramatic irony into the story just at the beginning of the written work. Then, the use of some examples in which at least one of the characters in the story does not know a piece of information. This resource is often used in comedy and mystery stories. One very clear example in English literature is Washington Irving’s *The Adventure of the Mason* (1910), in which we know the wealthy man has buried the treasure in the house, but the owner does not, so we follow the adventures of the mason to finally get the house. Some visual work that work with this structure is “The Wishgranter” (Athannassov & McDonald, 2016). In this short film, at least one of the characters does not know what is going on but the audience does.

In the Repetition structure, repetition is the main tool used to work it out. The base chain is INCIDENT+REPETITION+REPETITION VARIATION A+A+A+A’. This structure is very successful with pre-schoolers and first years of primary education. The repetition tool is very powerful when telling a story. English literature offers a wide range of materials to work repetition. One classic tale is Robert Southey’s *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (1837) where the sequence of three repetitions happens constantly. Other materials which can inspire the creative process of the students is Wise Brown’s *Goodnight Moon* (1947) in which the narrator says goodnight to all the objects and living creatures in the room and outdoors and a sentence (Goodnight...) is coming

back to keep the suspense until the end. Also, Michael Twinn's *There was an old Lady who Swallowed a fly* (1973) is a good example of a repetition with a surprising end. The storybook adds the previous sentence to the following page so the story is enlarged little by little with the effect of a never-ending story. All of these storybooks are available on line, so they might be a good resource for analysis.

The Intimacy Process structure comes next. It is an argument that explains how two unknowing characters are gradually establishing an intimate relationship (emotional and, perhaps, physical).

There is no base chain neither in novels nor cinematographic productions but there are *recurring elements*. Nevertheless, in children's literature and animated shorts there is a base chain: PRESENTATION OF 2 CHARACTERS+CASUAL MEETING +DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS TOWARDS INTIMACY (usually repetitions are used)+STAY TOGETHER. English literature has very interesting storybooks in this sense. One of them is Jenny SueKostecki-Shaw's *Same, Same but Different* (2011), in which two boys from two different countries meet thanks to a pen-pal class activity. At the end, they become best friends. Another example is Mireia Canals' *The Coloured Stars* (2015), in which 4 children meet in the park and two of them teach the other two how to have fun while playing together.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The twenty- first century starts with change since we teach pupils who are active screeners, who are used to playing virtual games and to perceiving the world through a screen more than through a book. This does not mean that children reduce their capabilities of imagination expansion, but this implies that children need new stories with new methodologies in present-day classes. This also means that university students, who are willing to become assertive English teachers need to improve their creativity when teaching young learners. Literature and cinema are very imaginative tools to reach this objective.

One of the main strategies is that the methodology used in class is theoretical and practical: Students are presented with the *base chain* of the structure. Then, the structure is illustrated with an example from English literature and an example from a short film. Afterwards, both texts are analyzed from the base chain point of view and questions are solved. Finally, students start their practical work, which consists in writing a short-invented text, following the base chain provided. Depending on the number of students in the class-group, this can be an individual, pairwork or agroup project. After writing it, they will have to decide the students' age, the learning objective (grammar, syntax, vocabulary), the topics dealt in the story and pre-reading, while-reading and post reading activities. Finally, each one of them will present the story in class and a debate will be opened to improve the project.

All the structures dealt in the classroom nurture diverse purposes. This means that grammar, syntax, vocabulary and even different topics are able to be among the objectives of the class session.

*The Dramatic Response in a Causal Structure* is the classic Aristoteles structure but offers a turning point at the end, which enlarges the suspense. The reader, or listener, is encouraged by an end which is not so, and enjoys the pleasure of an alternative ending. This

happens because the story is short and the rapid movement can be done with no damage to the discursive text. The books that fit this structure are related to the final turning point which can be from positive to negative and from negative to positive. The final turning point keeps the suspense and helps the teacher to maintain the pupils' interest in the narration of the events. It also suggests a wide range of alternative after-reading activities dealing with the final development of the story which may introduce topics, vocabulary, syntax and even grammar. *The Rereading Structure* has a very similar base chain with the previous structure but it contains a final turning point that implies the rereading of the story because this precise turning point changes the point of view of the overall reader's experience.

A *Descriptive Structure* must ensure the accomplishment of the description, no more no less. This is the most significant aim of this structure, so the plot will be complete when this objective is accomplished. There may be some incidents or events during the plot, but they are operating as developers of the main objective, that is, giving a complete description (Olsson, 1985). This structure also offers the possibility of dealing with many topics at the same time: taking a topic line related to "boats", students may plan a session dealing with rivers, lakes, seas and fishes. Also, routines can be well taught with these descriptive books. All follow the same structure, so children can easily recognize the main character. Therefore, the topic will be easily introduced. Finally, CLIL books are another option when preparing materials or sessions, especially for children in primary education. *The Serpent Structure* includes ellipsis and narrator and it is usually referred to a biography or a story of a process. The open ending helps to describe a part of a process or a part of a life of a person. The iconic symbol of the serpent is the possibility of the written story being able to be some chapters, vents, souvenirs, adventures of the protagonist which help the reader to know about the main character.

In the *Change in the Main Character Structure* the main objective is for the character to be transformed throughout the story. Hence, the plot must make the protagonist evolve. He or she must show his/her true personality at the end, but a process of growing up in some way must happen (McKee, 2002). This structure is based on the creation of the protagonist. Some questions are posed to the students to create -as a preface- the main character, and afterwards, the story can be developed. At this point, the title can serve as a clue to the topic and pre-and post-reading activities. The learning objective can be decided after the creation of the story. *The Dramatic Irony Structure* has irony as a central axis. Dramatic irony is when the audience is aware of a situation in the plot, but the characters are not, at least one of them is not aware of the situation. Installation of the dramatic irony into the story should happen just at the beginning of the written work. Then, the use of some examples in which at least one of the characters in the story does not know a piece of information. This resource is often used in comedy and mystery stories. In the *Repetition Structure*, repetition is the main tool used to work it out. This structure works very well with pre-schoolers and first years of primary education. The repetition tool is very powerful when telling a story. English literature offers a wide range of materials to work repetition. *The Intimacy Process Structure*, for instance, is a plot that explains how two unknowing characters are gradually establishing an intimate relationship (emotional and, perhaps, physical). There is no base chain neither in novels nor cinematographic productions but *recurring elements*. Nevertheless, in children's literature and animated shorts there is a base chain because the length allows it.

Based on this narrative structures research, some suggestions can be made. Interdisciplinary approaches to English Language Teaching – in relation to literature and cinema – should be made for ESL, to improve English language command of future generations. Also, literature and cinema can be very helpful due to its contents of fantasy and magic. Expanding the creativity to future ESL teachers may be very useful for them and a powerful tool for their future in-class management. Creating new stories may be relevant for expanding university students' capacities in the fields of writing but also in their speaking and listening skills. Above all, when talking about university students, this structure analysis may be very advisable for planning their own pre-school and primary education materials and courses. As for children, they may have the opportunity of sharing a new methodology, and new expectations for the English language class may arise.

University students must regain their capacity and willingness of inventing, of creating magic worlds for their pupils, to reach the objective of teaching them English as a second language. Focusing on stories will transport them to worlds and issues, which will be very far away from the real and powerful objective of the English language teaching. This is the strategy at its summit.

All in all, the purpose of this interdisciplinary approach to English language teaching is to encourage new teachers' generations to use their creativity when teaching English to very young and young learners.

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