



**Department of English Language and Literature**

**The Effect of Using Narratives on Iranian EFL Learners'  
Reading Comprehension**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The importance of narratives as a significant type of literary texts and their presence in all aspects of society and social experiences of ours is not hidden to anyone; the ever-presence of narratives in every age, every place and in every language is completely tangible. As such, the role and influence of narratives in language learning and in teaching an L2 have almost ever been a considerable debate among experts: psycholinguists, SLA researchers, and language educationalists. In this respect, the present study attempts to investigate the relationship between the use of narratives in EFL environments and its probable influence on EFL learners' reading comprehension abilities. To do so, three homogenous intact groups of Persian native-speaker Arak university students majoring in English Translation participated in this study; two experimental groups, namely Narrative and Non-narrative experimental groups, and one control group. Three short narratives and three non-narrative texts with a Flesch Reading Ease score between 65 and 75 were selected from a large body of existing texts and were used as tasks of elicitation for each Narrative and Non-narrative experimental group. The experimental groups received treatments for six weeks. The subjects' scores on both pre-post tests were compared using ANOVA and T-test. The results of pretest and post-test, administered, demonstrate a significant difference in test scores from pretest to post-test in both experimental groups over the control group. However, a performance comparison of two Narrative and Non-narrative experimental groups showed that Narrative experimental group has a significantly better performance. Possible reasons for this over-performance and implications of the findings for language teaching were discussed.*

**Key words:** *Narrative, Non-narrative, Narratology, Reading comprehension.*

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*Dedicated to My Dear Mother*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*This chapter attempts to outline the thesis skeleton. To do so, the opening section is devoted to an introduction that tries to shed light on the importance of narrative texts (either in the form of stories or other narrative forms such as Legend, Myth, fable, etc. in human life in general and educational environment in particular. The second section, statement of the problem, gives explanations to clarify the necessity of using narratives in instructive environments, especially in language teaching and learning. The third section demonstrates the significance of study. Then, the research assumption, the research question and research hypothesis will be presented. Finally, explanations and definitions for the key concepts and notions that are used frequently throughout the thesis will be presented.*

### **1.1. General Overview**

Franz Kafka once said that the book is the axe by which we break open the frozen seas within us (1904). This metaphoric expression signifies that books have the power to open up persons' emotions and sometimes have the power to change the majority of our opinions. Reading stories and generally literary works enables us to put our own feet into other people's shoes to have experience on their psychological, social, economic and imaginative life. If so, then by reading we can find out the reality of other points of view that come from other people irrespective of their cultural or linguistic background.

In addition, learning to read for a variety of purposes is essential to success in school and to learning in general. There are findings in applied linguistics and reading research (Musen, 2010; Kong, Powers, Starr, and Williams, 2012) that confirm a strong relationship between reading proficiency and academic success from the primary school to university level:

students who read a lot and who comprehend what they read usually attain good marks (Pretorius, 2002).

As Chastain (1988, p. 216) states: “Reading is a basic and complementary skill in language learning.” Second language learners need to read greater quantities of authentic materials for communication. It involves comprehension and when readers do not comprehend, they are not reading.

One of the most important sources in the realm of foreign language teaching has been always literary texts since they reveal a wide variety of language use in authentic contexts. Ronnqvist and Sell (1994) stipulate that the reading of literary texts in the target language provides the readers (Foreign or second language learners) with authentic and simply obtainable experience in the pragmatics regarding the fact that literary texts have the ability to relate formal linguistic expression to situational and socio-cultural contexts. The world of literature study and teaching and its place in first, second, and foreign language education has moved forward significantly in the past two decades and as Carter (2007) describes;

In many contexts of teaching and learning language and literature, the predominant view that has emerged over the past twenty years is that ‘literary’ texts are socially, culturally and historically variable, should be defined as part of institutionalized social processes, and are discourses that, far from being separate from other discourses, share characteristics with them.(p.5)

Meanwhile, the role of narrative in language teaching environment as a type of literary text seems to be unquestionable. Kreiswirth (1992, p. 629) became aware of a tendency in the human and social sciences which he suggested to be called the “narrative turn”: “there has recently been a virtual explosion of interest in narrative and in theorizing about narrative; and it has been detonated from a remarkable diversity of sites both within and without the walls of the academia”. Ever since then, not only the enthusiasm was not diminished in this regard, conversely, more interest was generated; nowadays, it would be difficult if not impossible to put a division within the Human Sciences that does not deal with narrative in one of its many manifestations. Historians centralize their attention on the narrative

formation of their reports, psychologists investigate any existing relationship between narrativity and conceptions of the self, proponents of law scrutinize the place of narrative in the courtroom, philosophers consider the role of narrative in argumentation and explanation, theologians consider the narrative structure of Religious literature like Bible, exponents of management studies discuss the potential of narrative to resolve the business conflicts—and the list could continue (Heinen & Sommer, 2009).

Narratives, in one form or another, seep into almost all aspects of society and social experiences of ours. Narrative forms are found not only in the literary contexts but also in the remembrance of life events, in textbooks and historical documents, in scientific data explanations, in political speeches, and in day-to-day conversation (Nash, 1994). Even, some people believe that all human knowledge is naturally narrative based (Schank & Abelson, 1995 p.1), they say: “Virtually all human knowledge is based on stories constructed around past experiences, and new experiences are interpreted in terms of old stories”. Intuitively, they believe almost any knowledge irrespective of whether they are facts or beliefs, originate from storytelling and story understanding.

[Roche](#) and [Sadowsky](#) (2003) explain the importance of the story in the following excursive:

1. Stories are global and leave behind all boundaries of language, culture and age.
2. Stories reflect human thought. All evidence from neurology and psychology come to the conclusion that Human thinking follows a narrative structure. Concepts that are transmitted through stories go far beyond the ideas’ explanations through logic and analysis and imprint themselves naturally into human minds.
3. Stories delineate our personality types. Our sense of identity is created by the stories we tell ourselves, the ones we come to believe and those we choose not to care.
4. Stories construct and protect a group's sense of community. Stories Line up and motivate the sense of community by representing the world in vivid illustration that builds emotional associations among constituents, giving them a sense of collective purpose.

*Shannon (1995)* gave the following explanations to outline the importance of stories from another perspective:

...stories are important to people, politics, and education. Stories are how people make sense of themselves and their worlds. In young children's spontaneous stories that they act out as they play, we can see how they believe people relate to one another, who they hope to become, and how they will behave. We can see adolescents play roles in their own and other people's stories in order to figure out where they fit into their ever expanding worlds. As adults, the true and imaginary stories we wish to tell and believe suggest what we value most in this world. In a real sense, stories make people. For this reason, stories are political. Whose stories get told? What can those stories mean? Who benefits from their telling? These are political questions because they address the ways in which people's identities -- their beliefs, attitudes, and values -- are created and maintained. These identities determine how we live together in and out of schools as much as school rules or governmental laws. (p. xi)

Narratives, whether verbal or visual, mediated or face-to-face, constitute one of the most prevalent types of discourse. Narrative is a fundamental characteristic of the human mind, a primary mode of thought (Bruner, 1990). It seems narratives also, do have essential potential to play an important role in teaching foreign language context. They are able to deal with all levels of proficiency, all age groups and by and large many classroom activities (Birlik & Salli-Copur, 2007). Many articles have been published through which the psychological aspects of narratives, the importance of narratives in thinking and experiencing have been taken into consideration (Hardy, 1977; Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1996; Donald, 1991; Harrison, 2004; László, 2008). However, in comparison with other disciplines, SLA/FLA researchers have been slower to associate the impact of using narratives, with an analytic method, tool, or object of inquiry on the foreign language teaching/learning environments. So, narrative research in TESOL/TEFL still remains very much in its infancy. In this regard, this research aims to show the effect of using narrative texts in EFL classrooms on learners' reading comprehension ability.

## **1.2. Statement of the problem**

Barthes (1977) stipulated that; “narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, cinema, comics, news item and conversation” (P.79). This ever-present nature of narrative is comprehensible by the fact that narratives are included in social actions. “As a basic experiential and existential mode, as an anthropological feature of humans, the capability of narration had existed even before the appearance of the language or the story, and played a primary role in the development of human thinking, personality and culture” (László, 2008 P. 39). Narratives have been usually used as linguistic resources for language teachers in second or foreign language teaching area (Ahmadian, 2011). Despite all these facts, and despite the fact that many people have claimed that the use of literary texts, because of many reasons, are of high significance in EFL/ESL and even in FLA (Bakhtin, 1975; McKay, 1982; Carter, 2007; Paran, 2008; Van, 2009; Hester, 2010; Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan 2011; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Knight, 2011; Ahmadian, 2011) the number of experimental research studies in this area is very little! Almost all studies in this regard are based on theoretical speculation and oratory on the use of literary texts in language teaching environments, and a small number of research has been carried out on the practical phase to establish the accuracy of many claims by scholars saying that the use of literature in language classes are of high usefulness. In this respect, the present study is going to find if the use of narrative texts in EFL context has the potential to be influential in improvement of the reading comprehension abilities in Iranian EFL learners.

## **1.3. Significance of the study**

Reading is recognized as one of the most important skills in academic and professional success in general, and in second and/or foreign language education in particular (Grabe, 1991; Carrell, 1989). Reading ability is especially becoming more significant in Iran in which most EFL seems to be reading-based. Furthermore, due to the prominence of the English language as an international means of communicating scientific and technical information around the world, reading ability in English does something like a receiver set



that receives information from the satellites moving in orbits of science. Think about this comparison: take into consideration if it is difficult for us to bend, stretch, lift a heavy object, or run a few blocks whenever we need to do so! If so, many everyday activities in life will be difficult for us, too. Limited reading ability has much the same effect as limited physical ability. If it is hard for us to follow written instructions or directions or if we have trouble figuring out unfamiliar words or remembering what we just read, so these undeveloped skills, like undeveloped muscles, are life-limiting disadvantages. Practical studies on using narratives in EFL classes, especially in this area (Reading Comprehension), are still very rare. The present study is going to deal with the relationship between the use of narrative texts in EFL classrooms and its possible influence on reading comprehension ability of EFL learners. If narratives turn out to be useful to improve reading comprehension ability at the end of this study, then it may be a helpful source of inspiration for syllabus designers who design reading materials for university EFL learners to deal with the issue from a narrative-oriented point of view and provide learners with appropriate narrative texts to help them develop their reading abilities.

#### **1.4. The Research Assumption**

Some scholars believe in narrative nature of all human knowledge (Schank & Abelson (1995), some others for example believe in ever-presence of narratives in every nuance of human beings' life (Hardy, 1977). Narrative psychologists like János László (2008) refer to ubiquitous nature of narrative and believe that its presence in everywhere and every time is enlightened by the fact that narratives are included in social life. Given the centrality of narrative in the human life and experience, we can begin to appreciate the power of stories in language teaching and learning (Rossiter, 2002). We can appreciate that stories--like education itself--draw us out, lead us beyond ourselves. So, we may assume that narratives (in their many manifestations) have the ability to function as a powerful medium of learning, development, and transformation in educational environment in general and language learning (second / foreign language) in particular.

### **1.5. Research Questions**

The present study is going to answer the following questions:

- I. Is there any significant relationship between using narratives in EFL classes and improvement of Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?
- II. Is there any significant relationship between using non-narratives in EFL classes and improvement of Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?
- III. Is there any significant priority in using narratives vs. non-narratives in EFL classes and improvement of Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?

### **1.6. Research Hypotheses**

Based on the research questions, the following null hypotheses were formulated to be tested out:

**H<sub>01</sub>**: There is no significant relationship between using narratives in EFL classes and improvement of Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

**H<sub>02</sub>**: There is no significant relationship between using Non-narratives in EFL classes and improvement of Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

**H<sub>03</sub>**: There is no significant priority in using narratives vs. Non-narratives in EFL classes and improvement of Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

### **1.7. Definitions and Explanations of Key Terms**

This part provides explanations and definitions for the concepts and notions that are used frequently throughout the thesis. The definitions may lead toward a more precise understanding of the research.

### 1.7.1. Narrative

These days, when it comes to talk of narrative texts, we inevitably associate it with the novel or the short story that are types of narratives. The word narrative, however, is related to the act of narration. We are fully surrounded by narrative not simply in such writing like novel or historical writing. Above all, Narrative is fully dependent on the act of narration and there exists everywhere someone tells us about something. But, the main question is; what is **not** some kind of narrative, or rather, how should narrative be defined in order to distinguish it from non-narrative discourse?

Narrative is derived from the verb ‘narrate’ and narration is a very pervasive activity. Narrative is therefore closely connected with the speech act of narrating and consequently with the presence of a narrator. As a result, one could define everything narrated by a narrator as narrative. But the question is what exactly is narrated by a narrator? Is it a particular novel? Or is it the story that is presented in this novel? Abbott (2002) explains:

**Narrative** is the representation of an event or a series of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*, story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and Narrative Discourse is those events as represented (p.23).

Abbott (2002) also proposes that story is something that, through narrative, is delivered and it seems to pre-exist it. Simply, narrative is something that always seems to come next, in order to be a representation. According to him, narrative conveys story. This characteristic enables us, for instance, to maintain that the same story can be presented in a variety of manners. The life story of Cyrus the Great (Also known as **Cyrus the Elder** was the founder of the [Achaemenid Empire](#)) may be told in a number of ways in different historical works.

Under the influence of Seymour Chatman’s inspiring book *Story and Discourse* (1978), a broader sense of meaning in relation to narrative has come in to exist. It also embraces media other than purely verbal (oral or written) narrative discourses. Gerald Prince, in his standard work *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1987, p.58), says: narrative is “one or more

real or fictitious EVENTS communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATORS to one, two or several (more or less overt) NARRATEES”.

Based on what has been expressed so far and according to Fludernik (2009) narrative can be defined as follows:

A narrative (Fr. *récit*; Ger. *Erzählung*) is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure). It is the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonists. (p.6)

Last but not least, there are fictional (imaginary) and non-fictional narratives. Each of these two categories is divided into three subsets:

- I. Verbal narratives including novels and conversational narratives
- II. Visual narratives such as ballet
- III. Verbal-visual narrative like drama and film

Verbal narratives frequently have a narrator who produces the narrative discourse or narrative text. From the text, the reader constructs the underlying world and story or action structure (also called the plot), which is a manifestation of the fable or network of motifs of the story (Fludernik, 2009). Visual narrative is a story told primarily through the use of visual Medium like ballet that produces danced events and stage setting. Finally, Verbal-visual narratives including drama and film produce the narrative discourse through sequence of sounds and images. This categorization can be represented in Figure 1.1: