

Cartoon Shows: A Tool to Facilitate Comprehension in Young Learners

Saumya Sharma

Introduction

This article employs the story grammar model to explore the role of televised cartoon serials in facilitating comprehension in school children of elementary grade. In India, research in English language teaching has not only addressed the methods and approaches of teaching English in a multilingual society, its cultural and psychosocial aspects and the dilemmas of curriculum and texts, but also has focused on how to teach the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (henceforth LSRW) (Agnihotri & Khanna, 1997; Sheorey, 2006, Tickoo, 2003; Kudchedkar, 2002). However, scant attention has been paid to assessing whether or not the learner has comprehended the text. The fact that comprehension precedes production is well established, both in first and second language acquisition. Scholars such as Jean Piaget (2001) and Stephen Krashen (1981) have discussed the child's ability to comprehend (assimilate information and understand the various stimuli in the environment) much before his ability to articulate. Krashen (1981) uses the term 'silent period' to denote such a comprehension phase, in which 'comprehensible input' is necessary for learning. Comprehension is a complex process, which comprises cognition, affect and perception: through it learners negotiate meaning by creating schemas or mental frameworks, about the self and others (persons, objects and events). We can gauge the extent of a child's comprehension by analysing these schematic constructs, and this very premise has been employed in the story grammar model (Stein &

Glenn, 1979). This article tries to highlight how cartoon shows can be used to help develop the children's comprehension by forming schematic constructs. It is this comprehension, or cognitive processing, gauged through LSRW, that forms the focus of this paper, and not LSRW itself.

Cartoons: A tool of instruction

The soaring income of working parents combined with long office hours, has contributed to a child's excessive viewing of the television, be it in the form of cartoons or video games. Adapting cartoons—a much-maligned medium—as a teaching tool can help both the teacher and the taught to view learning as fun. Cartoon channels such as *Pogo*, *Nickelodeon*, *Hungama TV*, *Cartoon Network*, etc., broadcast different serials in a bid to attract the young viewer. These serials include cartoons such as Walt Disney's anecdotes of *Tom and Jerry*; Japanese narratives of *Doraemon*, *Kiteresu*, *Hagemaru*, *Shin-Chan*; Indian mythological tales such as *Chota Bheem*, *Tenali Raman*, *Ramayana*; and the exploits of Power Rangers, Ben 10 and Pokemon. Most of these are easily accessible; thus their recreational value can be exploited in the classroom. They are thematically relevant, since they portray diverse cultures, and raise key moral and social issues. Also, their repeated and short duration of broadcast, and their multi-modality (verbal and visual elements creating a dramatic effect) permit them to be used as effective teaching tools.

Theoretical framework

Adopting the story grammar approach (Stein & Glenn, 1979), cartoon shows can be utilized for teaching comprehension. This approach states that stories are thematic and plot-based, and contain the following features:

- a) A setting that introduces the characters, time and action.
- b) An initiating action, which is the action or the event that sets up the problem for the story.
- c) The internal response of the main character to the problem.
- d) The attempts made by the protagonists to solve the problem.
- e) The consequences of the actions of the characters, leading to the resolution of the problem.
- f) The reactions of the protagonists to the situation or event.

The fact that comprehension precedes production is well established, both in first and second language acquisition. Scholars such as Jean Piaget (2001) and Stephen Krashen (1981) have discussed the child's ability to comprehend (assimilate information and understand the various stimuli in the environment) much before his ability to articulate.

Adults use the same story-structure in recalling (Mandler and Johnson, 1977) and summarizing stories, and this approach has even been employed to teach reading comprehension to learners via stories. To illustrate my premise, I have chosen three popular cartoon serials—*Tom and Jerry*, *Doraemon* and *Tenali Raman* (though others can be used as well)—to demonstrate how they contain the basic elements of story grammar, and can therefore be used to teach comprehension.

Story Grammar Elements	Tom and Jerry	Doraemon	Tenali Raman
Initiating Action	Mostly, Tom wishes to catch Jerry.	Mostly, Nobita creates a problem by disobeying his parents or teachers, or by getting into trouble with Gian, the school bully.	Tenali's enemies hatch a plot to revile him in court by creating a problem, or some commoner brings his grievance to the king.
Internal Response	Tom gloats over Jerry's panic.	Nobita is worried and seeks Doraemon's help.	Tenali is puzzled and mulls over the problem.
Attempts to solve the problem	Tom continues the mischief and Jerry retaliates either with objects-at-hand, or with the help of other animals such as Butch the dog.	Doraemon produces a gadget to solve the problem, but Nobita misuses it and the trouble escalates.	Tenali attempts to solve the problem through his wit/ clever tricks. Sometimes he takes the help of his wife.
Consequences	Jerry is saved from Tom's attack, who is either punished for his misdemeanor, or sustains an injury.	The problem is solved, Nobita is saved, and the gadget is restored to Doraemon.	The culprit is caught, order is restored, and Tenali is rewarded by the king.
Reactions of the Protagonist/s	Jerry is happy and relieved, whereas Tom is sad.	Nobita realizes his mistake and promises not to repeat it; Doraemon is happy.	Tenali's enemies are shamefaced; the king praises him much to everyone's joy.

Comprehension is a two-fold process which includes surface comprehension of the text as well as a deeper comprehension of the events concerning the society at large. By viewing these cartoons, the learners are exposed to the mannerisms, social norms and cultures of various regions.

Analysis: Story grammar through cartoon shows

Tom and Jerry, produced by Walt Disney, shows the tales of a tyrannical cat called Tom

who is always pestering a mischievous mouse named Jerry. *Doraemon*, a Japanese cult icon that has become immensely popular of late, presents the anecdotes of an intelligent, humane robotic cat—*Doraemon*—who employs ‘electronic gadgets’ to help his naughty but innocent friend Nobita from problematical situations, or the school bully Gian. Its popularity can be evinced from the fact that it is telecast in most vernaculars, and was officially declared by the Japanese government as the anime ambassador of its culture in 2008. Unlike these

Stages	Questions on Tom and Jerry	Questions on Doraemon	Questions on Tenali Raman
Initiating action	Where are Tom and Jerry? What prompts Tom to trouble Jerry? What plans does he make to catch him?	What does Nobita’s mother or teacher ask him to do? What does he actually do, and why?	What do Tenali’s enemies plan, and why? What problem does the commoner face?
Internal Response	How does Tom feel after laying the trap for Jerry? How does Jerry feel?	What are the consequences of Nobita’s disobedience? Why is he worried? Why does he go to Doraemon?	How does Tenali feel when he learns of the problem? How do his enemies feel?
Attempts to solve the problem	What does Jerry do to save himself? Whose help does he take and how? What does Tom do to continue chasing him?	What does Doraemon do to help Nobita? What does Nobita do with the gadget? Why does Nobita get into further trouble?	What puzzles Tenali? What does he do? Does he take anyone’s help? If yes, who is it? Is the problem solved?
Consequences	Does Tom finally catch Jerry? How is Jerry saved? What happens to Tom in the end? Is he punished?	Why does Doraemon get angry with Nobita? What do Nobita and Doraemon do? Who helps them? How does Doraemon solve the problem? Who is punished and why?	Does Tenali solve the problem? How does he do so? What tricks does he use? What reward is Tenali given? What happens to the culprit?
Reactions of the Protagonist/s	Does Tom realize his mistake? How does Jerry feel?	Is Nobita saved? Does he realize his mistake? How do Nobita and Doraemon feel?	How does Tenali feel? Is the king pleased? Do his enemies realize their mistake?
Additional Questions on humour and social relevance	What is/are the funniest scene/scenes in the episode and why? What do we learn from it? What could have Tom done to save himself?	What is your favourite scene in the show and why? What do we learn from the story? What would have happened if the problem had remained unsolved? Who would have been hurt? Does this problem affect us too? If yes, what should we do to help ourselves?	What do you learn from the story? Do we face a similar problem? If yes, how should we solve it?

two shows, *Tenali Raman* tells the tales of the 'Birbal' of South India—a minister in the court of King Krishnadevaraya in Vijayanagar, who uses his intelligence to defeat his enemies. This legendary character has been adapted by various production houses in multiple regional languages, a notable case being *The Adventures of Tenali Raman* produced by Cartoon Network in 2001. Each episode of these shows has a different setting which introduces the place, the characters and the time frame.

The story grammar model allows comprehension to be tested on two grounds: a) actions and b) emotions of the characters, by forming schemas about the characters, events and settings. The teacher can show an episode and give handouts of a set of questions for each stage of the story

Imagination, an integral component of comprehension, is employed in such a virtual world, allowing the young learner to become a part of the problem, and finding a solution by either impersonating one of the characters, or helping them. Alternatively, a recall test may include an oral or a written recollection of the salient events of the story and the teacher can maintain records of the learners to evaluate their progress.

grammar. He/she may even add an additional set of questions on humour and values in order to contextualize the model and make it socially relevant to the young learners. These questions are deliberately generic, so that they can be modified by the teacher according to the episode shown, and the issues raised.

In the process of comprehending the text, the child thinks, feels, perceives and interprets speech within the context. The questions help to facilitate this comprehension further; they serve as prompts to decode the dialogue and visuals (*Doraemon* and *Tenali Raman*), or only visuals (Tom and Jerry), by forming schemas

about the characters, their actions and feelings, the sequencing of events, and the setting.

Comprehension is a two-fold process which includes surface comprehension of the text as well as a deeper comprehension of the events concerning the society at large. By viewing these cartoons, the learners are exposed to the mannerisms, social norms and cultures of various regions. According to Hall (2011), the L2 classroom becomes a "place where the 'local' and 'global' come together" (p. 27). He also quotes Johnston suggesting that language teaching is a value-laden activity. So these cartoons can serve to teach social and moral values and also raise awareness about their relevance. The questions help the learners to understand the events in the show, and to relate them to their everyday experience. For example, one of the episodes of *Doraemon* shows the protagonists building a subway for Nobita's father so that he does not have to walk in crowded places to reach that subway. This episode can be used to highlight the relevance of subways in modern India. In *Tenali Raman*, the protagonist agrees to serve the cruel Raj Purohit in order to teach him a lesson on how to treat servants humanely. The teacher can, by underscoring the importance of treating the domestic help in a humane manner, educate the children to be socially responsible citizens.

The responses of the learners can be scored to record the progression of their comprehension. After viewing a series of cartoons, teachers may give the children a home and a classroom assignment in the form of an online game and a recall test, respectively. A worksheet consisting of the following questions about the online game may also be given as follows:

- 1) On which website did you find the game?
- 2) What were the names of the characters in the game?
- 3) What problem/s do they face?

- 4) What did they do to solve the problem/s?
- 5) Did you play one of the characters?
- 6) How did you help the characters to solve the problem?

Imagination, an integral component of comprehension, is employed in such a virtual world, allowing the young learner to become a part of the problem, and finding a solution by either impersonating one of the characters, or helping them. Alternatively, a recall test may include an oral or a written recollection of the salient events of the story and the teacher can maintain records of the learners to evaluate their progress.

Conclusion

Comprehension can be enhanced by using elements of story grammar to explain and express the plot and themes of cartoons shows. Cognitive understanding includes a complex set of thinking, feeling, perceiving and listening skills that can lead to successful teaching and assessment of comprehension. Furthermore, exercises on writing, grammar and vocabulary can be designed based on the same shows, making them an all-embracing yet enjoyable medium for teaching English in India.

References

- Agnihotri, R. K. & Khanna, A. L. (1997). *Problematizing English in India*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Hall, G. (2011). *Exploring English language teaching: Language in action*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. New York: Pergamon Press.

- Kudchedkar, S. (Ed.). (2002). *Readings in English language teaching in India*. Chennai: Orient Longman.
- Mandler, J. M. & Johnson, N. S. (1977). Remembrance of things parsed: Story structure and recall. *Cognitive Psychology*, 9, 111-157.
- Marshall, N. (1983). Using story grammar to assess reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher* 36(7), 616-620.
- Piaget, J. (2001). *The psychology of intelligence*. (Malcolm Piercy and D. E. Berlyne, Trans.) London: Routledge.
- Sheorey, R. (2006). *Learning and teaching English in India*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Stein, N. L. & Glenn, C. G. (1979). An analysis of story comprehension in elementary school children. In R. O. Freedle (Ed.), *New directions in discourse processing* (pp. 53-120). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Tickoo, M. L. (2003). *Teaching and learning English: A sourcebook for teachers and teacher-trainers*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.

Cartoons

- “Raman Jeopardy Jester.” *The adventures of Tenali Raman*. Cartoon Network, India. 2001. CD.
- “The Yankee Doodle Mouse.” *Tom and Jerry*. Walt Disney. Cartoon Network, 26th June, 1993.
- “Build up Subway.” (Television series episode in *Doraemon*.) Cartoon Network, 14th April, 1979.

Saumya Sharma is an Assistant Professor (Linguistics) at EFL University, Lucknow Campus, Lucknow. Her interests include critical discourse analysis, discourse and psychology and children’s literature.
saumyasharma2@gmail.com