

Close and Careful but not Cautious: Using the Writer's Workshop Method in the Reading Classroom

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**If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use reading it at all.
—Oscar Wilde (1889)**

When passing out a work of short fiction in a second language classroom, I'm often dismayed by the large number of students who immediately pull dictionaries from their bags and begin to engage in a word-by-word translation. But perhaps, I shouldn't be so emotional about it. Masuhara (2003, p. 342) notes that from Japan to Brazil and all points in between, "reading in the L2 seems to mean almost invariably a slow and laborious decoding process, which often results in poor comprehension and low self-esteem." Part of this is perhaps simply a result of the reading classes themselves. In Japan at least, reading classes often revolve around stories and articles dense with unknown words and crammed with new target grammar. Only by breaking down the text into its component parts are the students able to get the information they need in order to pass the all-important mid-term or final exam.

To make matters worse, when texts are not used to teach specific lexis or grammar, but as the basis for more conversational activities such as discussing social issues or even just relating the events in the story to students' personal lives, teachers often rely on a standard set of comprehension questions as the initial means of checking understanding. Unfortunately, it is doubtful that the questions teachers use actually provide any kind of accurate information. The following is a summary of the features of good comprehension questions as identified by Paul Nation (2008, p. 88-90) :

- *They should be easier to understand than the text itself*
- *Answering the questions requires reading the text, which means that first, a very proficient reader to try and answer the questions without reading the text before using them*
- *The questions should use language/words not in the text itself, which makes them even more difficult to write for lower level students who have limited vocabularies*
- *The questions need to test comprehension, not memory, so they should avoid focusing on details which even a proficient reader might not remember.*

I have rarely come across comprehension questions which meet all of the above criteria. But even if I do manage to make (or stumble upon) a set of decent questions, what do I learn about how my students are engaging with a text from their answers? I might recognize that they are failing to comprehend chunks of the story, but I'll never be exactly sure where or why they are having difficulties. In addition, by giving students a set of comprehension questions, I may be putting them in the mindset that reading a story is all about finding the right answers. The questions become signposts which direct the way they read. This is, in and of itself, at odds with the kind of experience I want my students to have when engaging with a story.

How do I want my students to engage with a story? In my ideal world, they would read carefully, without being overly cautious. They would believe in the importance of the words on the page, but also understand the active meaning making role that a reader needs to take on. And most of all, they would truly believe that stories need to be read again and again, and that each consecutive reading, rather than a chore, was an act of exploration.

In fact, the process of reading in which I would like my students to engage is very similar to the way I was taught to read as a member of a creative writing workshop. In a creative writing workshops, the students are not considered to be masters of their craft. Every story they write is going to be flawed. In order to provide useful feedback to the writer, a careful reader has to clearly articulate where and why the story has gone astray. This means that workshop participants must read a story multiple times. In the workshop I attended at Washington University in St. Louis, we made extensive use of time-lining as a tool for understanding the stories we read and to provide feedback. Time-lining also an activity I have found to be adaptable for the second language classroom. With a few tweaks here and there, it can help

students move beyond wading in the shallows of a story and dive down into the narrative to find a richer, more personal understanding.

Time-Lining a Story

The first step in this activity is to have students read through a story and use a highlighter to mark all of the major events. The events are then mapped onto a timeline. Depending on student level, the activity can be simplified by preparing a timeline in advance with some of the events already mapped onto it. The timeline activity ensures that students have identified the “what” and “when” of a story. While this does not prove full comprehension, not being able to identify this information is a clear sign that students are lost. Unlike comprehension questions, this activity also allows teachers to begin to identify specific problems a student is having. For example, during a first reading, some students will miss the change in form from simple past to past perfect which often signifies a jump in narrative chronology. This is especially difficult in very short stories in which over the course of just a few sentences there might be three or more chronological shifts, such as can be found in the following excerpt from Grace Paley’s (2006, p. 337) “A Man Told Me the Story of His Life”:

And then I was made a cook. I prepared food for two thousand men.

Now you see me. I have a good job. I have three children. This is my wife, Consuela. Did you know I saved her life?

Look, she suffered pain. The doctor said: What is this? Are you tired? Have you had too much company? How many children? Rest overnight, then tomorrow we’ll make tests.

The next morning I called the doctor. I said: She must be operated on immediately. I have looked in the book. I see where her pain is. I understand what the pressure is, where it comes from. I see clearly the organ that is making trouble.

Paley’s story has a Flesch-Kincaid grade level of 2.3 and fully 97% of the words are found on the General Service List (West, 1953), and yet, without paying careful attention to chronology, students become lost as the story moves back and forth through time. Aside from

verb tense, lower level students with minimal reading experience are sometimes not even aware that visual cues such as a set of asterisks or a significant gap between printed text can also signal a shift in narrative time. Time-lining helps to make these cues more salient, and when they are missed, provides a teacher with a diagnostic tool to help pinpoint exactly at what point in a story understanding faltered. After doing time-lining activities in class, I often collect student feedback surveys. A majority of students report that the activity does indeed make it easier to understand the stories. Perhaps more interestingly, students often say that time-lining a story results in a second and third reading feeling both more purposeful and enjoyable. One student went so far as to compare making a timeline to holding a map, allowing her to know, “What direction I am facing as I read through the story.”

Creating a timeline serves two more functions. Once students have completed a timeline (usually in small groups), they can then compare it with other students. There are often differences in opinion as to what constitutes a “major event” and these differences lead to some lively conversations. Aside from these conversational opportunities, once students have a timeline, they can then begin to explore moments which are only hinted at in the text, the narrative ellipsis. In *Writing Fiction*, Burroway (2000, p. 39-40) notes that there is crucial difference between plot and story. The plot is composed of the fixed points a writer chooses to reveal in the text. A story, however, can never be reduced to plot points alone. For example, “A Man Told Me the Story of His Life,” begins with:

“Vincent said: I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to be a doctor with my whole heart. I learned every bone, every organ in the body. What is it for? Why does it work? The school said to me: Vincent, be an engineer. That would be good. You understand mathematics.”

When time-lining this story with my students, what they produce initially is rather sparse (see Figure 1).

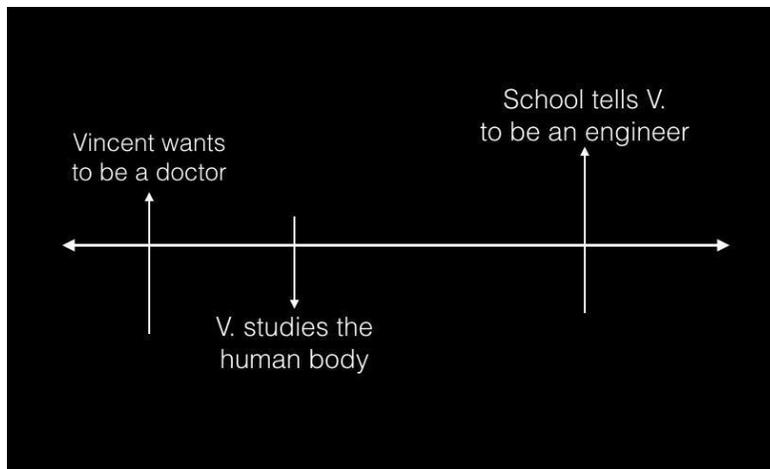


Figure 1

While not exactly wrong, it has not managed to capture quite enough of the story. Still, the students have taken a first step towards a fuller comprehension. They have become familiar with the basic contours of the story and at the same time practiced a number of important skills required for working with various genres of text: identifying key points, paraphrasing a sentence, and even summarizing whole paragraphs. After the initial time-lining, students can then go back and examine the spaces between events. They can begin to explore the importance of interpretation and come to better understand the role that the reader plays in bringing meaning to a text. In the case of this particular story, one of my students remembered taking an academic ability test at the end of junior high school. He asked if schools in the US also required students to take these types of tests. This kind of conversation, in which students recognise that they truly have the experience necessary to, as readers, help co-construct the narrative, can (albeit slowly) provide the support students need to differentiate between when they are confused because of the words on the paper and when they feel lost because an author has purposefully left a blank space within the narrative. In the end, these conversations result in finished timelines which are more balanced mix of the words from the page and the experience and ideas of the students themselves (see figure 2).

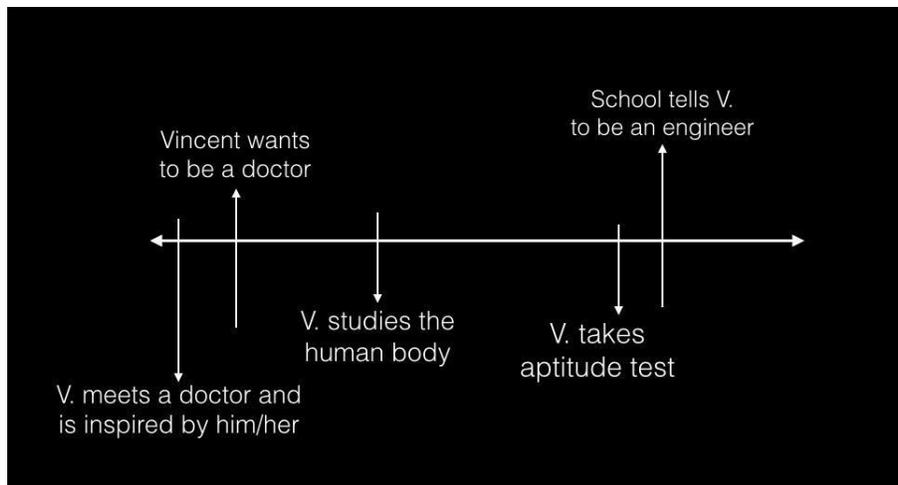


Figure 2

Once my students have become familiar with the time-lining process, usually by the third story, I include it, along with out-of-class pre-reading, as a homework assignment. If even only a few of the students prepare a timeline in advance of a discussion class, the sometimes extreme difference in what has and has not been included provides a clear example of the multiple ways in which a story can be constructed out of plot. For many of my students, it is the first time for them to recognise that part of learning to read in a second language requires letting go of the idea that there is a correct word by word translation which leads to understanding. And while not all interpretations are equally valid, knowing that they do not have to understand the text in one specific way decreases anxiety and affords students a bit more psychological space to enjoy the act of reading.

All communicative interactions require us to deal with ambiguity. All texts, whether a business letter or a conversation with a friend, require us to read between the lines. Working with literary short stories provides our students with a chance to practice this crucial skill. Time-lining stories provides a framework for making that practice a little less anxiety-inducing while also turning multiple readings into a source of classroom conversation. More importantly, a well structured time-lining activity encourages students to take responsibility as readers, to actively engage in the process of meaning making. Because without the awareness and courage to build a personal meaning in the empty spaces found in any text, no story is ever truly complete.

Author notes

Kevin Stein is a member of the LiLT SIG, working at a private high school in Osaka. He brings a range of teaching experience to his writing on education and topics in ELT. His special interest is the use of stories in the language classroom. He's an active blogger on topics such as teaching, reading, and exploring the language classroom. You can find his writing in various places including regular blog posts over at his blog *The other things matter* (<theotherthingsmatter.wordpress.com/>). He is also a professional mentor at the International Teacher Development Institute (iDTi) professional development website <itdi.pro/blog>. Kevin can also be found via twitter: @kevchanwow.

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