

Crossing Disciplines—Transferring Knowledge in the Reading Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to underline the importance of teaching autobiographies as a pedagogical resource to achieve content comprehension by making learners connect their prior knowledge to the experiences of the autobiographer. The study is underpinned by the schema theory, which signifies that, “every act of comprehension involves one’s knowledge of the world” (Anderson et al. 1977). We propose that comprehension of contents entail more than mere linguistic knowledge of the learners. Rather, understanding of the text involves the ability to connect the text to one’s own prior knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, drawing on Shirley Williams’ autobiography ‘Climbing the Bookshelves’, we conclude that teaching autobiographies to readers not only serves easy encoding of the ideas, but also enables readers to explore how the autobiographers coped with various challenges at different stages of their lives. Our proposed instructional approach moves slightly beyond the schema theory as it provides readers the opportunities to utilize their prior knowledge of psychology to understand the autobiography, and make them link prior subject knowledge in psychology to the new knowledge arising from the autobiography.

KEYWORDS

Autobiographies; Psychology; Pedagogical

Introduction

This paper sets to highlight the importance of using autobiographies in classrooms for fostering positive learning habits in learners. The paper intends to show that when reading an autobiography or any other genre, one can link prior knowledge of a topic to what one is reading. In this way, top down (prior knowledge) and bottom up (what one is reading) will help reading become more meaningful. The paper draws on schema theory, and suggests that in order to cultivate effective reading habits in English language readers/learners, learners may be exposed to autobiographies to integrate their background knowledge and life experiences with that of the text to

comprehend the contents, and relate themselves to the autobiographers’ life experiences. Such an approach is likely to stimulate greater cognitive and emotional involvement of the students in the text, and ultimately internalize the linguistic aspects of the target language. This is critical because the schema theory describes the process by which readers combine their own background knowledge with the information in a text to comprehend that text. Nearly all readers carry different schemata (background information) and these are also often culture-specific. This is an important concept in English as a Second/Foreign Language. Teachers can devise some pre-reading tasks designed to build or activate the learner’s schemata.

Defining autobiographies

Palabra (2011) described an autobiography as a concept for a special practice of narrative life or a term which celebrates the impact of unknown person and is the narration of life that includes particular attributes of the person. Smith and Watson (2001) write that "autobiography is the story of a person's life written by himself." However, Lejeune's (1988) definition of autobiography seems wider where he suggested that autobiography is "the retrospective narrative in prose that someone makes of his own existence with emphasis on his life and especially upon the history of his personality."

Since the eighteenth century, the term autobiography took the status of literary genre. However, some critics like Welleck and Warren (1987: 25) did not agree on the literary status of autobiography. They added that the aesthetic function is dominant and therefore literature should be imaginative. The definitions given by the scholars have created an important debate on whether autobiography is fiction or non-fiction. Lang (1990:198) submits that autobiography "stands on the margin between fictional and non-fictional writing."

Schema

Schema theory is premised on the belief that "every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well" (Anderson et al. 1977). Thus, readers develop a coherent interpretation of text through the interactive process of "combining textual information with the information a reader brings to a text" (Widdowson, 1978, p. 71).

The reading process, therefore, involves identification of genre, formal structure and topic, all of which activate schemata and allow readers to

comprehend the text (Swales 1990:89). In this, it is assumed that readers not only possess all the relevant schemata, but also that these schemata are actually activated. Where this is not the case, then some disruption of comprehension may occur. In fact, it is likely that "there will never be a total coincidence of schemas between writer and reader" (Wallace 1992:82) such that coherence is the property of individual readers. The following section describes some of these differences in interpretation.

Ibrahim (2006) states that schema is applied by researchers in different fields. For instance, it is applied in understanding and remembering stories, problem solving, reading comprehension, intercultural communication, and instructional design. Wei-hua, Jun and Xiao-hui (2007) mentioned three kinds of schema: linguistic schemata, formal schemata, and content schemata. Firstly, a linguistic schema is the reader's existing language proficiency of vocabulary, grammar, and idioms. As they suggest, the linguistic schemata are the principle of other schemata. Because linguistic knowledge is important to understand the text, without linguistic schemata, the reader cannot decode and or comprehend the text. A second kind of schema is formal schemata. Wei-hua, Jun and Xiao-hui (2007) described formal schemata as the rhetorical structure and organizational form of the text. Formal schemata include knowledge of different types of texts, and different text types and genre. Formal schemata are described as abstract, encoded, internalized, coherent patterns of meta-linguistic, discourse and textual organization that guide expectation in our attempts to understand text.

The third kind of schema is the content schemata. This kind of schemata is the background knowledge of the content area of the text. They include topic familiarity, cultural knowledge and previous experience with a field. Content schemata deal with the knowledge relative

to the content domain of the text, which is the key to the understanding of texts. In the following section, we present an autobiography of Shirley Williams (2001), and discuss its various dimensions to suggest how teachers may apply the same theoretical approach in their classroom practices to cultivate effective reading in the learners. In particular, some psychological aspects of the memoir are highlighted with reference to effective and meaningful learning habits.

Climbing the Bookshelves: The autobiography of Shirley Williams

The book is titled *Climbing the Bookshelves* because the author's father encouraged her to have high ambitions for herself - including daring to climb the bookshelves in his library. It is an autobiography. The author, Shirley Williams was elected a Member of Parliament at the age of 34, rose to be a junior minister at the Ministry of Labour, United Kingdom, when she was 36 and became a Minister at the Department of Education and then at the Home Office before she was 40. The autobiography focuses mainly on her political life but she does also talk about her family focusing on her parents in the early chapters and on other family members in the concluding chapters.

The writer's (Shirley Williams henceforth referred to as SW) mother was Vera Brittan, a passionate peace campaigner. SW describes a highly privileged childhood - nannies, nurseries and affectionate maidservants. Her first marriage, family life and travels abroad are also described in some detail. However, as earlier mentioned her career as a politician dominates most of the book. The closing chapters are divided between her description of life in America, continuing world conflicts and the aftermath of 9/11, and above all her family life and second marriage.

She writes with a lot of emotional control (which can be a defensive strategy) and her anger at significant others including her first husband, who had an affair with a married woman, is not overtly expressed in her autobiography. This control on emotions and her rationalization and understanding of significant others who have obviously hurt her is manifested in this autobiography.

Psychological issues highlighted in the memoir

Developmental psychology examines past behavior to understand current behavior and to predict future behavior over the various stages of one's life. How does one's family, education, gender, culture and environment affect our perceptual expectancy over our life span (see Bronfenbrenner 1979)? We will focus on her childhood and family, and schooling rather than on her career and politics although where relevant, connections will be made between her childhood and home life and the kind of politician she became.

Family life

Shirley had an unusual household as her parents, and her mother's female friend all stayed in one house. Whilst her mother who had lost her loved ones in the war, was a worrier (p9) and probably depressed, her mother's friend was life-affirming and radiated gaiety (p9) she died when Shirley was only 5 (p7). This is all SW says i.e. that she died when SW was five. As earlier mentioned there is remarkable self control on emotions in the autobiography.

There were also nannies and a governess and a cook-housekeeper. Shirley says "I felt I was their daughter too" (p 21). This is not surprising given that she says of her mother "Her deepest commitment was to writing, then to my brother and only after them to me." (p5) and describes her mother as "... a remote parent intensely ambitious." Much is revealed when she says "My mother doted upon John (her

brother)" (p.22). Although later she states that as an adult she started to love her mother as a friend. She says and I quote "It was to take several years for me to learn to love her and then it was to love her as an adult, a beloved friend rather than as a child loves its mother" (p.51).

To feel that one is not the most important thing to one's mother must affect one's psychological sense of self. Not feeling loved as a child could have had spillover affects in later life. To me this could have affected her self esteem (how one feels about oneself and one's skills) and later in the autobiography she says "Like many women of my generation, I thought of myself as not quite good enough for the very highest positions in politics" (p.394). According to Carl Rogers (1961) if parents only offer conditional love, children may grow up to believe that they need to be perfect to gain acceptance and love from others. They may be highly critical of their own abilities.

Tizard (1989) explains that early experiences are important but that some of the negative consequences of maternal deprivation can be overcome with good relationships later in life. SW does talk about the many friends she made throughout her autobiography so obviously she did have good relationships later in life, which to some extent may have compensated for the maternal deprivation she faced in early childhood.

Bandura(1962) discusses the effect of modeling and explains that individuals learn through watching and perceiving their environment. Children learn a plethora of behavior through their experiences in the social world. SW learnt through frequent shopping trips with her mother that she did not like shopping. She says that her mother liked shopping for hats as it would lift her spirits (p. 6). Shirley recalling the effect of these early experiences says that they immunized her against both shopping and fashion. On p. 325 SW says, "I learned to cook as a

teenager, spurred on by my mother's incapacity." So perhaps certain actions are modeled as Bandura claims but others which do not bring happy memories may be resisted.

It appears that the trauma of rejection by a distant preoccupied mother was somewhat reduced by her father's affection. Yet, although obviously proud of him, SW seems to have realized at an early age that "he had no respect for his own achievements" and "slipped into sycophancy when encountering notable public figures." But she claims he gave her "the single greatest gift with which a child can be endowed, self-confidence"(p. 3). How could he have given her self-confidence when he himself appeared not to have it and slipped into obsequious flattery when meeting well known people?

Effect of Home on Choice of Career

Her father injected in her a love for politics. She says "Politics invaded our conversations." SW states that she would discuss philosophy and religion with her father after church as her father did not like small talk. This focus on intellectual talk suggests that the relationship between father and daughter was cooperative and intellectual and there was a symmetrical relationship between them. Under these conditions, authentic forms of intellectual exchange become possible; each partner has the freedom to project his or her own thoughts, consider the positions of others, and defend his or her own point of view. In such circumstances children's thinking is not limited by a dominant influence. Piaget (1970) believed in "reconstruction of knowledge", which means favorable conditions for the emergence of constructive solutions to problems. Here the knowledge that emerges is open, flexible and regulated by the logic of argument rather than being determined by an external authority. In short, cooperative relations provide the arena for the emergence of logical thought. As a child she

claims that she early on realized that "... that no one would pay me any attention unless I engaged in political conversation too" (p.18).

Of her father, she says that he loved parties and there were many famous visitors to their house. It is not surprising that as a politician she was at ease with many people across cultures. Her father, keen to try and help advance her career, even introduced her as a teenager to Lady Astor, the first woman to take a seat at Westminster (p.152).

From her father therefore she experienced unconditional positive regard, notwithstanding the fact that she was a girl in a society that at that time did not put much worth on women. She says the fact "that I was a girl was irrelevant to his ambitions for me. I could be anything I wanted to be" (p.3). Later at her work place she encountered prejudice based on gender discrimination. Her external experience when she worked was contradictory to her experience with her father in the sense that women were deemed to be second class citizens. It appears that there was incongruity between the internalizations made as to her self worth as a woman compared to the reality she faced in the working world (see Rogers, 1961).

She credits her father for her success as a political leader. In her autobiography SW says of many other famous women that they like her "... were examples ...of daughters living out their fathers' aspirations." She goes on to say "...relationship between fathers and daughters ...in my view is a key to understanding how some women become leaders" (p.152)

Childhood in this kind of family with a distant mother and a father who encouraged her to climb the steep bookshelves he had in his library resulted in a sense of independence and a feeling of fearlessness. She says "at 13 I had learnt to be independent in charge of myself, I didn't

want to be fussed over or protected. I reveled in my freedom so I was wary of my mother's love for me" (p.50).

The nurture assumption argues that the way parents bring their children up governs who their children become. In this case, as Shirley's parents were too busy with their own causes and commitments this resulted in her sense of independence. Coppersmith (1967) investigated the relationship between self-esteem and parent-child relationships and research indicates that certain styles of parenting are associated with varying levels of self-esteem. SW's mother was involved in pacifist issues and as SW says her priority was her writing. This lack of interest could have also resulted in the extensive freedom given to her.

Of her parents she says "My parents allowed me far more freedom than most children my age enjoyed" (p.64). This resulted in 12 year old Shirley leaving the house at night to watch London burn during the war. Freedom and independence, perhaps rising from a preoccupied mother and a father constantly traveling to save others, may explain why SW learnt to live on her own and become fearless and independent at an early age. In fact she and her brother were evacuated to the United States in 1940, when she was 8 years old and she did not see her parents for three years! Her mother did not accompany them as she wanted to help out in certain causes in UK during the war. It must have been traumatic to leave one's parents, home and country at such a young age. SW learnt to live in a new culture with new people. It is very telling that she describes her life in the States as "...so exciting I cannot remember feeling homesick" (p. 37

Having faced an attempted gang rape at a young age she learnt to overcome the fear of strange men on her own by facing risky situations on her own and deliberately not sharing her fears with her parents. Her emotion was one of fear but

her response was to intentionally face risky and fearful tasks and activities. SW says (p. 64). "I felt the need to prove myself by doing whatever frightened me." In fact SW began "... night walks with dog ... parents did not know I first felt sick with fear but later felt I could handle whatever situation I might find myself in" (p. 65). "...indeed, for most of my life, especially when I was young, I have hardly ever been frightened" (p. 25). This shows that her behavior/actions were to help her overcome her fears. In this way her perception of that fearful past experience would change.

She did not talk to her parents of the attempted rape she experienced on a ship or of the bullying she encountered in school. SW says "telling my parents was unthinkable first they were strangers..." In fact "... seeking their help would have been in my eyes contemptible" I would have to find my own way to cope (p. 64). This is very telling as she apparently grew up earlier than the norm as she had to be independent and self-reliant. Being given a lot of leeway by busy, preoccupied parents, helped. McClelland (1987) found that achievement-motivated people are likely to have parents who expected them to show independence between the ages of 6 and 8. SW at a very early age decided that she did not want to attend boarding schools and knew the kind of schooling system she wanted.

Modeling Altruism

Both parents were committed to noble causes, her father to the independence of India movement and her mother to South Africa. Her father also physically and financially helped in the humanitarian needs of Catalonia. She modeled altruism as her parents were committed to humanitarian courses and as a politician SW helped fight an unfair law against the entry of East Asians from Uganda to UK and also supported Asian workers in the UK who she felt should not

feel isolated and unsupported (p237). Although Bandura's Modeling theory may help explain SW's need to help the marginalized and the underprivileged. Baumann, Cialdini, and Kenrick (1981) offer an alternative explanation called the Negative State Relief Model, which proposes that people help others in order to make themselves feel better.

Nurture vs. Nature

Nature and Nurture are mutually interactive. It was not only nurture but also peers in schools that affected her attitudes and behavior as a politician. The various schools she attended both in the UK and USA affected her beliefs and actions as a politician. For instance, even at the age of 8 while in a school in the UK, she learnt to accommodate, used a Cockney accent and entered and left her house by using the basement as she did not want her schoolmates to know that her background was different from theirs.

Each of us develop within a particular set of circumstances determined by the historical time in which we were born and the culture in which we grew up (see Hareven 1994). This influences and impacts the person we become. During the war SW at a tender age had to leave home and UK and go with her brother to the USA. To leave home and country at such a tender age could not have been easy yet on retrospection SW says she learnt many things.

SW found American teachers informal and friendly unlike the teachers in the class-ridden schools in the UK. Her experience in classless society for 3 years during her formative years helped her understand and want to help the underdog and affected her views of class. Her views on equality and class and income differences due to birth also made her question the right of some to have better houses, education etc. (p. 392). She says

...this goes back to what I saw at Christchurch elementary school in

the 1930s reinforced at the international level by what I witnessed of the horrors of war and the deprivation of poverty and what my mother taught me about them.

So nurture and nature, family, and peers, affect our values and behaviour. This resulted in her becoming "...a democratic socialist, trying to hammer out a compromise between capitalism and social justice" (p392).

Gender Equality

Although she lived in an era when women were considered second class citizens, her parents "...instilled in me the confidence that girls were intellectually and socially the equal of boys" (p112). In adult life she had a strong sense of social justice that made any kind of discrimination repellant, whether it was gender, ethnic or other discrimination.

Religion, Values and Behavioral Intentions

Her father was a converted Catholic (p. 23) but the children were left free to decide what religion they wanted to belong to once they became adults. SW chose to be baptised as a Roman Catholic when she was a young adult (p. 85). Many of her values and beliefs stem from this religious tradition. Marriage to her was a sacred trust (p.155) and she was married 17 years to her first husband and after he left her for a married woman she fell in love again but could not contemplate a second marriage without an annulment. So that relationship with a loved one did not culminate in marriage. It was only much later when the annulment was given that she married someone else. Even that she did not nearly do as her brother suddenly died and she took on the responsibility of her brother's two children. So she contacted her fiancé and told him there was no question of them getting married (p.328). Such was her sense of responsibility!

Values are predictors for various variables such as attitudes and behavioral intentions (see Schwartz and Howard 1980). For instance, when in Guangzhou, China, SW went to a cathedral despite being told by the officials that she should not do so (p.231). This shows determination and fearlessness as no other foreigner was to be seen in the cathedral. She left the lone old priest some money.

In the last line in her autobiography quoting Auden SW says "We must love one another or die". Loving one's neighbor is an important tenet of Christianity. She says she was also a Christian socialist because Christ loved the poor (p.392/3). Her family was small and she says being a MP was like being a member of an extended family and she could help this large family (p 389) and make "... the world a better place" (p.387). These values it appears she wants her grandchildren to have and prays that her grandchildren will be "generous, understanding and wise" (p.395).

Emotions and composure

When both her mother and her marriage died in the same year she says "the eyes and ears of the media are everywhere". So one learns composure "... to never let go except with the most trusted friends. That discipline acts as a lifeline. The show must go on." (p.213).

Later life span- Final Stage to Maturity - Ego-integrity

She learnt acceptance when she lost both her first and second husbands in the same year in 2003 and says "I now belong to a generation that every year sees its ranks reduced" (p.386). This matter of fact statement shows not only acceptance but also resilience by SW to the aging process and its inevitable consequences.

One approach to defining successful aging focuses on the subjective psychological experiences of the individual. It is not so much what you do or accomplish in life but rather how you feel

about it. To feel blessed by knowledge and by a strong support system shows successful aging. SW feels blessed and says "I can only say how blessed I have been to have known men and women of such courage and vision" (p.387).

She is obviously an optimist and in her 80s she can say that she finds the future fascinating (p.388). Her zest for life appears to be still there. This can be deemed successful aging.

Reflection

Each person is a product of a unique combination of the perceptual, cognitive, emotional and personality factors that affect development. SW's mother's neglect of her affected her sense of self. On the other hand, her father's encouragement of her and his intellectual discourse and his drawing her into his political circle must have had a positive impact on her sense of self.

Her war time experiences were a factor which affected her and her very strong egalitarian nature was partially formed by her early years. Moreover, her time in America exposed her to a less class ridden society. SW has great self-restraint and exercises no anger at those who caused her grief - this could have proceeded from a number of factors including her generosity of spirit and her Catholic faith. It appears that both nurture and nature have contributed to the woman SW is.

Erikson (1997) contends that present and future behavior must have its roots in the past because later stages are built on the foundation laid in previous ones. When children overcome early obstacles easily they are better able to handle the later ones. As a child SW faced her fears by taking risks like her walks in a burning London during war time. When her father disappeared during the war time, she faced this issue rather optimistically and says "I don't recall ever doubting that he would survive, his

imperturbable *savoir faire* was contagious" (p.41).

Erikson (1997) believes that personality development is determined by the interaction of an internal maturational plan and external societal demands and that challenges are met by a combination of inner psychological influences and outer social influences. When challenges are met successfully people are well prepared to meet the challenge of the next stage. It is clear that in her working life and her political career SW saw failures as a time to look for new opportunities. In short, as an optimist, she saw failures and disappointments as an opportunity to do new things. For instance, when she met a road block in her political career in the UK she went to a prestigious university in America to teach. When one door closed she always opened another door for herself.

Erikson (1997) discussing the last or 8th stage of life says that one could face it with integrity or despair. SW apparently views her life as satisfactory and worth living despite the fact that many of her loved ones including her parents and husband and other close friends have died she finds the future "fascinating".

Teaching autobiographies: implications for comprehension of text

Drawing on schema theory, we sum up that autobiographies can be used as a reading resource to help teachers teach texts effectively, and enable learners to comprehend the meaning using their background knowledge. As delineated in the preceding part, teachers can synthesize different cognitive, psychological or sociocultural aspects of the autobiography to make learners understand the text, and possibly connect their background knowledge with the experiences of the autobiographer(s). We maintain that by teaching autobiographies to learners not only serves easy encoding of the ideas, but , it also enables them to explore how the

autobiographers coped with various challenges at different stages of their lives. The events can trigger stimulus, and drive them psychologically to act similarly in their own lives. For instance, SW, courageously faced her fears by taking risks like her walks in a burning London during the war time. In addition, she also shows enormous guts as a child, and confronted the disappearance of her father during the war with optimism as she says that, "I don't recall ever doubting that he would survive, his imperturbable *savoir faire* was contagious" (p.41). In the life event of SW also lies practical lessons, which might stimulate the psychological potentialities of children to imitate fearlessness in their own lives.

Erikson (1997) argues that present and future behavior must have its roots in the past because later stages are built on the foundation laid in previous ones. When learners, especially young learners overcome early obstacles easily they are better able to handle the later ones. Thus, we argue that an instructional approach underpinned by an amalgamation of autobiography and psychology can potentially transcend beyond the schema theory, serving dual purposes: comprehension of the reading material and inculcation of positive life-related lessons. With this approach, learners are provided opportunities to utilize their prior

knowledge of psychology to the understanding of autobiography, and this can help them link prior subject knowledge in psychology to the new knowledge arising from the autobiography. In this way we are moving slightly beyond the schema theory which helps in decoding text by utilizing prior knowledge. We put emphasis on the importance of making links between knowledge in one subject discipline e.g. psychology and making connections between that knowledge and the new information arising from an autobiography.

We also believe that the employment of such instructional approach towards reading at the tertiary or secondary level of schooling, is likely to result in several advantages, which can include,

- Active involvement of learners in the text
- Effective comprehension of the contents/subject material
- Psychological effects such as relating one's own experiences to that of others
- Development of positive and sustained learning habits
- In this way top down (prior knowledge) and bottom up (what one is reading) will help reading become more meaningful.

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