Students who study English conversation can benefit from the concurrent study of literature in English. Literature provides students with the opportunity to learn new grammatical forms and vocabulary, but more importantly, helps students develop critical reasoning skills that can be used in other fields. However, some students are reticent to study literature in English, believing that it is inherently more difficult than other types of texts. Part of this concern stems from students feeling they do not have the necessary cultural or historical knowledge to be able to critically read and discuss such texts. In addition, the vocabulary load and atypical grammar often found in literature can be daunting for some students.

To make literature more approachable for students, teachers may make concessions to simplify English language texts. One means of doing so is to present students with either abridged or leveled texts. Using such texts does allow students to more easily understand the plots of certain pieces of fiction, but this approach has several drawbacks: First, these texts strip away the voice and idiosyncrasies of the author; graded readers tend to have a certain sameness in tone and style (McKay, 1982). Using such texts then keeps students from learning how to decode syntax that is not typically found in language learn-
ing texts and from seeing how tone and style can affect meaning. What students are often left with is plot, but little more than that.

Students also know that they are reading a simplified version of a novel; subsequently, they may feel that understanding literature in English is out of their grasps and simply too difficult. Finally, unless the teacher is to rework stories of his or her choosing, one is left to select from a list of “greatest hits” of the western canon, making it difficult to find texts that suit the needs and interests of the class.

Rather than adapting the text, teachers may use prereading activities that will help students develop the schema necessary to unlock the meaning of a text. On its face, schema theory makes sense as a method for making literature more approachable for students—the more students know about a subject, the easier it should be to understand texts related to the same topic. Though its efficacy is now being challenged, such an approach remains popular with instructors; many ESL/EFL reading texts and graded readers contain prereading questions, historical notes, and vocabulary lists as a means of helping students build schema. In practice, then, it is still a central methodology for preparing students to read challenging texts. This paper will review the basic framework of schema theory, describe its practical application in the literature classroom, and describe an alternative framework for preparing students to read fiction.

Reading “A Rose for Emily”
This year, my survey of American literature class read “A Rose for Emily.” The story is a standard of high school and university literature classes, often chosen due to its place in the canon and its usefulness in discussing common literary elements such as symbolism and foreshad-
owing. The story describes the plight of Miss Emily, who after years of living under the strict control of her father—who sent away any man with the temerity to call on her—finally seems to find love when a stranger, Homer Barron, comes to town. Emily’s relationship with this outsider is first accepted by the townspeople, but as it continues it is viewed as scandalous. Emily’s prior lack of experience with romantic relationships makes her unable to understand Homer’s true intentions. Once it is clear that Homer plans to leave, Emily decides to poison him and lay him in what she believed would be their marriage bed, and in that bed Homer—and Emily—are together, until her death many years later.

“A Rose for Emily” presents a number of challenges for readers: it has a large amount of low frequency vocabulary; its historical setting is probably unfamiliar to many language learners, making the importance of Homer’s status as an outsider from the North hard to understand; and the time-leaping structure of the story may make it difficult for some to follow the events of the story.

My class consisted of a mix of third- and fourth-year students who displayed varying degrees of skill with written and spoken English. Some had spent considerable time overseas or had taken English instruction in addition to their high school and university classes. Others were less confident speakers, but all were able to carry on an extended discussion in English with limited breakdowns in communication. As we wrapped up the final day of discussion about the story, I asked if there were any questions. Students had a few queries about vocabulary as well as questions about motivations of the principal characters—in particular, the role Tobe had in the murder of Homer. A final call for questions was followed by a few moments of silence; a
student then asked, “Do you need to know history to understand the story?”

What the relationship is between the reader and the text—and what exactly it means to know a text are questions at the foundation of literary criticism: Does a text have a meaning within itself? Does the reader herself bring meaning to the text? How do history, culture, and gender affect our reading of the text? These are all questions that have been debated and continue to be central to the question of how to read a text. But, in this case, the student was not asking in a broad sense what does it mean to know; rather, she was expressing concern that she did not have the requisite knowledge to unlock the secret of the text. She believed that to understand this text requires information from outside of the text—information she felt she did not possess.

This is a common concern for some learners who are studying literature in another language. And this concern has been fostered to a large degree by texts and teacher training that puts an emphasis on schema building as a means to help students develop reading skills. While there is a separation for language learners in the study of reading compared to the study of literature, there can be substantial overlap in the two fields. And in classes where students are doing extensive reading of longer texts in another language for the first time, instructors may also teach reading strategies or use schema building to make it easier for students to complete these texts. Even highly skilled language users may struggle with literature texts and need assistance in decoding meaning. How then to best help them?

Schema Theory and Literature Study
Extensive prereading activities are a common means of helping stu-
dents understand challenging texts. The basic tenet of schema theory is that background knowledge, or schema, affects how an individual understands a text. That our experiences and knowledge color how we understand new information is clear. A number of experiments have shown that readers with knowledge about a topic are able to recall details more effectively than those without such knowledge (Winfield and Barnes-Felfeli in Al-Issa). Teaching students how to link their knowledge of the world with what they read in a text is a useful endeavor. “If we see or hear something totally unexpected, we often cannot even begin to understand it for a few moments, until we have devised a schema into which it will fit” (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000, p. 4). In a sense, the more we know about the world as a whole, the better we are able to comprehend different types of texts. Or, put succinctly, “Every act of comprehension involves one’s knowledge of the world, as well” (Anderson et al. (1977) In Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983, p. 553).

However, much of the literature about the practical application of schema theory focuses not on teaching students how to connect their knowledge of the world to new texts but rather on how to attend to perceived deficiencies in students’ knowledge about the world. Therefore, instructors often find it necessary to provide students studying literature in their L2s with extensive background information about a text as a means of helping them become successful readers.

This information may help students develop either “content schema, which is knowledge relative to the content domain of the text…[or] formal schema, or knowledge relative to the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of texts.” (Carrell, 1987). And while both content and formal schemata are important for comprehension, content schemata has been found to play a more important role
(Carrell, 1987). Therefore, while there is some focus on form in the classroom, most prereading activities ask students to develop knowledge about content, which may include vocabulary as well as historical information. Carrell and Eisterhold explain that in the classroom “Sometimes it [previewing] involves teaching a key concept which is culturally loaded… Previewing can also include presenting specialized vocabulary and structures that the teacher predicts will cause difficulties” (1983, p. 564). This prereading phase may also include such activities as “pictures, slides, movies, games, and other such devices to activate and build upon the students’ schema” (Al-issa, 2006, p.44).

Gajdusek (1988) provides a typical example of a schema-building vocabulary activity. Prior to reading the Ernest Hemingway short story “Soldier’s Home,” students are given a handout with excerpts from the text, with key words blanked out, for example:

“He fell into the easy _______ of the old soldier among other old soldiers: that he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time.”

Students are then asked to provide possible words that can fit in the blank. This is followed by a discussion of their answers and, finally, the teacher supplying the word that does, indeed, appear in the text. The types of words chosen for this activity varies, but most often include low-frequency content words, or words that are deemed central to understanding some aspect of the text.

Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) provide an additional example of vocabulary building concerning Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery.” The authors explain, “If one does not understand the process or purpose of a
lottery, then this short story about one woman who “wins” and is then killed by her neighbors will be totally incomprehensible. In this case, a discussion of lotteries before assigning this short story would be absolutely necessary” (p. 568).

**Shortcomings of Schema-Building Activities**

Parkinson and Thomas explain that traditionally schema building was done through “pre-teaching,” giving background on author on text and author. This seems to still be common in practice, but, they say, it “is under serious theoretical assault and discouraged by teacher trainers and others” (2000, p. 4-5). While it is true that schema building is under “theoretical assault,” it may be premature to state it is being discouraged by teacher trainers, as seminars on prereading activities remain common within professional development seminars. And while some studies have shown the effects of background knowledge on comprehension, Grabe counters that “studies have shown that background knowledge has a minimal influences on individual differences in L1 reading comprehension” (2009, p. 76).

One of the biggest challenges in designing schema-building activities, is deciding what information students need to be successful with a text. In “A Rose for Emily,” a teacher might rightly assume that the words *cupola, select* (adj.), *encroached, coquettish, august*, and *cedarbemused* would be difficult for a student. Likewise, one could easily argue that these words are required to understand that Emily’s home—not to mention Emily herself—are in a state of disrepair. Following typical tasks set within the schema theory, one might expect to spend 30 minutes or more on helping students understand these words, and, in particular, their context within the story and, also
important, how they are used today—or whether, in the case of *cedarbe-mused* they are used at all. And while 30 minutes is a small amount of time to devote to vocabulary building, it should be noted that these words come from a single paragraph of the story. By drawing out all the words that could be challenging and are critical to understanding the story, one could spend several class periods on vocabulary alone. With schema building activities, one runs the risk of reducing literature to simple vocabulary study.

Perhaps the strongest criticism of schema theory is proponents' inability to clearly define specifically what it is and the cognitive processes by which schema building takes place. “Most researchers do not actually describe details of schema theory, but simply refer to schemas as a shorthand for generalized knowledge representation in memory or background knowledge.” (Grabe, 2009, p. 78). If schema theory is simply a vague way to describe factual knowledge, how then should the student's question be approached: Do students need to know history to know a story? And, if not history, what then does a student need in order to be able to discuss fiction.

First, then, it is important to define what it is to know a story. Schema theory emphasizes the importance of background knowledge in knowing what a story means, but “knowing” is either not clearly defined in the literature or simply refers to the ability to recall of details. However, this understanding of specific details only shows that students have a surface-level understanding of a text. When we ask students to read fiction, though, there is a greater expectation for what it means to understand the text. Ideally, students should be able to express three levels of knowing a text. Blau has condensed these into the pithy sentiment of *What does it say? What does it mean? Why do we*
care? (2003, p. 51). Or, in a more careful examination, when we ask students to know a story, we would like them to first be able to understand the basic facts of the story: the who, what, when, why, and where of the tale. Once students can explain what a story says, they can consider what it means. Early on, students may be tempted to reduce this phase of knowing to pithy homilies such as “be kind to your friends” or “work hard.” But, further practice with discussing stories will allow for more meaningful responses. Finally, to know is to be able to make a judgment about the quality of the work. Why do we care? requires students to explain, using facts from the text, what makes a story worth reading.

To help students determine what a story means, teachers may place the story in its historical and cultural framework, and it is here that English language learners may feel that they lack the necessary information to meaningfully discuss a story. It is tempting to preface a discussion of “A Rose for Emily” with a description of Reconstruction era South. One could reasonably assume students will need to see depictions of Sherman’s march to the sea to understand the devastation much of the South endured after the Civil War. Likewise, a discussion of carpetbaggers, Jim Crow laws, and segregation would all be expected schema building for students to be able to fully understand this story. This information, though, only begins to provide students with the factual historical content of reconstruction America.

While it seems clear that schema development would take us far from the actual work of reading and discussing literature, teachers must still accept that students’ concern about lack of content knowledge may, in fact, affect how they approach a text. “Providing background information and previewing content for the reader may seem to be the most obvious strategies for the language teacher. We want to
avoid having students read material ‘cold.’ Asking students to manipulate both the linguistic and cultural codes (sometimes linguistically easy but culturally difficult, and vice versa) is asking too much.” (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983, p. 567). While practitioners note that in the process of building schema one must not simply tell relate the plot of a story to students Gajdusek (1988) warns against the temptation of doing so, explaining, “In our enthusiasm to provide facilitating background, we may run the risk of doing too much, of simply telling the students what is there instead of allowing them the excitement and pleasure of discovery” (p. 235).

Such a warning is well served for teachers; the temptation to tell students how to read a story is always present, whether it be due to time pressure to complete material or a concern about filling silences when asking students to explain what takes place in a story. But, schema building, by its very design takes away “the excitement and pleasure of discovery.” This takes place in two ways: When engaging in vocabulary-building activities, by separating out some material as important and difficult, teachers automatically cause students to focus on passages with this material. They naturally find meaning attached to these parts of the story. Additionally, this causes problems for students when they find they come up against challenging vocabulary that was not part of the prereading activities (Blau, 2003). That is, from a student’s perspective, the teacher has made an effort to pull out any vocabulary that should be seen as particularly challenging or important. Because students have different backgrounds and vocabulary knowledge, such a list can never account for all the words a student may have difficulty with. But the student assumes that they are somehow unprepared or not skilled enough to understand the text because
there are items they have trouble decoding that are not part of the pre-reading activities.

For example, “A Rose for Emily” has a heavy vocabulary load, and, in fact, may present challenges to individuals who use English as their L1. Therefore, a teacher will try to select the vocabulary that will present the most problems. But when a student encounters *tableau*, *pauper*, or *imperviousness* and cannot refer to a vocabulary handout for assistance, he or she is likely to believe the story is out of their reach.

One should also consider the time commitment necessary for schema building and its resulting benefits. Returning to the example of the lottery in Shirley Jackson’s story. It is true that understanding the word *lottery* is important if one is to understand the story. But the authors have not made the case that understanding the term requires an in-depth discussion of how lotteries work and their cultural significance when students could much more efficiently work with a classmate or check a dictionary to adequately understand the term.

Finally, it is unclear if schema building actually affects students’ ability to interpret a story. If prior to reading “A Rose for Emily” students are presented with a lecture about post-Civil War America, complete with descriptions of Reconstruction Mississippi, a student is likely to believe this story is firmly rooted in the past and its meaning must somehow be connected to this time in history. Schema building runs the risk of making literature only a historical artifact that describes the people of a particular time and place. It can, simply, remove the reader from the equation, limiting the text to a narrow or single interpretation. It might help students understand what a story says, but it also locks them into a limited understanding of what a story means.
Classroom Approaches
What then can be done to allay student fears about reading literature in English? Schema building and vocabulary exercises set up literature as something that is unapproachable without some outside knowledge. Rather than building schema we should, as Blau (2003) explains, help students build tolerances for both failure and ambiguity. Though students may be reticent to do so due to time pressure from other classes as well as jobs and other factors, they should be brought into the habit of reading a text multiple times and becoming comfortable with the idea that understanding comes not from gaining historical and cultural knowledge that is outside their understanding; rather, they should use what they do know in order to understand a text. Blau goes on to explain that “closely related to an ability to suspend closure, this tolerance [for ambiguity] is less a matter of patience and faith in one’s capacity to solve problems than one of accepting the limitations and developmental nature of our understanding and the paradoxical, ambiguous, and provisional condition of most human knowledge at any moment” (p. 213).

One approach is to reassess the usefulness of not only schema-building activities but also the typical Q&A format many literature classes use, in which the instructor asks leading questions and students respond. The success of classroom Q&A depends much on the dynamic of the class and the willingness of students to share ideas—and possibly be wrong. With highly motivated and confident students, this can be a productive means of operating a class. However, students who question their ability to understand challenging texts may be unwilling to share ideas in front of the whole class. While in theory, telling students that multiple ways of understanding literature is valued in the
classroom should be enough for them not to feel pressured to produce “correct answers,” in practice, many students feel that instructors are expecting a certain type of response.

Monahan’s description of a class reading Crime and Punishment provides a description of how such a class might become more comfortable with ambiguity and multiple interpretations of a text. He explains, “While I had always assumed that my discussions were instrumental in students’ understanding of a book, I was discovering that it just wasn’t true⋯. Slowly I began to realize that I needed to sponsor students’ direct interaction with a text if I wanted to develop their independent skills as readers. I needed to stop mediating their reading experiences through me” (2008, p. 99). He goes on to explain that by asking students to first write about the significance of different passages from the text, they are more confident during class discussions.

To remove oneself as the intermediary between students and the text requires students to be more active participants in the classroom, working with each other to understand the text. At its simplest, it can be by asking students to summarize for each other what happened in the text. This provides students the opportunity to check their comprehension with a peer before engaging with the class as a whole. Students will naturally have gaps in their understanding of stories, but each student will also understand different parts of the text, or also bring a different interpretation to the events. By working out a summary, students can also build vocabulary, removing the need for vocabulary building prereading activities.

Students may also be given different parts of the text to read closely. One approach to discussing “A Rose for Emily” is to ask students, “Who is the narrator?” A more communicative approach would
be to provide different groups of students different paragraphs from the
text ands ask them who is speaking in each. Since the voice of the nar-
rator slowly reveals itself over the course of the story, students will
have different responses, based on the passages and information they
have at hand. They can then work together to discuss different possibil-
ities.

What is the role of history?
How then, to answer the student’s question? Do students need to study
history to understand literature? Students often do want to know the
historical setting of the stories they read. While they could do this work
on their own, there is, in fact, room for the study of history in the litera-
ture classroom. In my own class, we talk about the historical and cul-
tural issues that are connected to the stories we read, but this is done
after students have an opportunity to talk about the text. Students are
able to compare how they first reacted to a story and then develop
alternatives once they have more information.

It is not a question that students often find literature challeng-
ing. However, a schema-building approach to literature instruction only
enforces the idea that literature is too difficult to understand for stu-
dents. By providing historical and cultural information after students
have the opportunity to develop opinions about a text, teachers allow
students to develop critical thinking skills in which they must use the
text itself to support their ideas. By making such information part of
post-reading activities, students can become more confident readers.
References


