

Kalpana Mukunda Iyengar

I'll Ask You Three Times: Are You Okay?

Using Graphic Organizers to Support University-Level English Language Learners

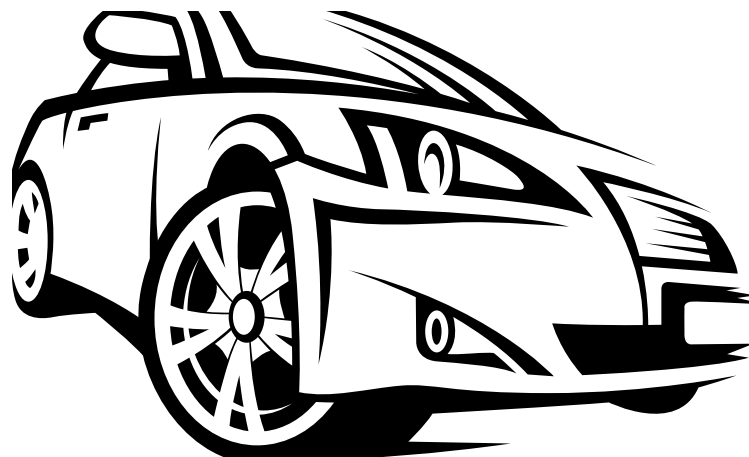
I teach intermediate rhetoric and composition for international students at a private university, and I have observed the difficulties these students face while reading and writing academic texts in English. Therefore, I am constantly looking for strategies to help my ESL learners acquire language skills for success across the disciplines.

During my fellowship in the summer institute of the San Antonio Writing Project, I discovered that graphic organizers are one possible approach for supporting ELLs in their language acquisition. “[Graphic] organizers portray knowledge in a meaningful way, which helps bring clarity to ideas as connections are made” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 1). Students learn to categorize and classify concepts through the development of schematic maps, and graphic organizers serve as simple schematic map (Lopez, Ponce, & Quezada, 2010).

International university students are often multilingual with proficiency in their native or heritage languages, but may have very little exposure to the English language; hence, listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English can be challenging to them. As a result, using texts with difficult vocabulary and organization

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may pose a threat to their understanding of the language. As an alternate to using difficult texts with challenging structures, a novel may be beneficial for ELLs, especially during their first semester at an American university. Further, using graphic organizers with a novel may provide additional support in the language acquisition process because according to Alvermann (1980), Dye (2005), Baxendell (2003), graphic organizers are beneficial in establishing the connections between concepts in a text.

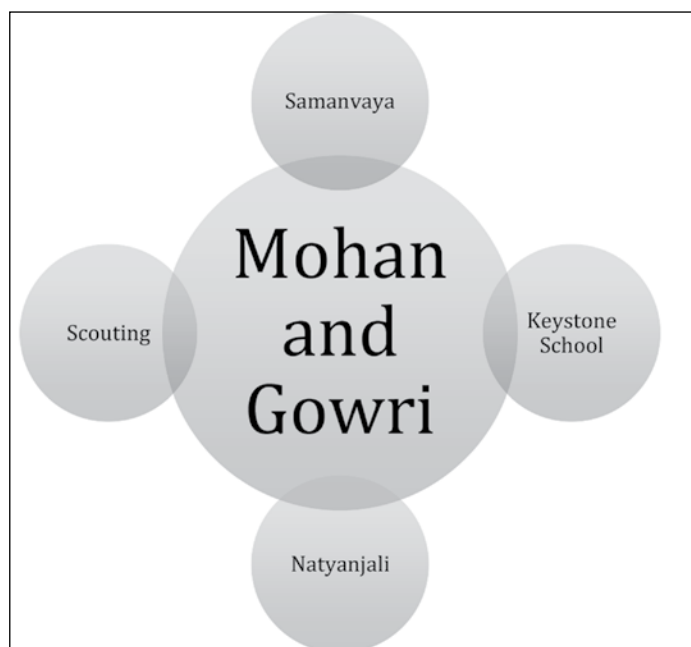


Figure 1. A sample concept map.

I decided to use the concept map (Lopez, Ponce, & Quezada, 2010) to teach my developmental English students vocabulary building using a chapter from the novel *I'll Ask You Three Times, Are You Okay?: Tales of Driving and Being Driven* (Nye, 2007). I chose this particular novel because it is a collection of fictional first-person narratives about global travel, with settings ranging from Manhattan to Glasgow to the Taj Mahal, and international students can follow the language of travel that is based on their prior knowledge.

A concept map (Tang, 1992) is a cognitive tool that enables students to make connections between concepts in the text. Figure 1 is an example of a concept map.

Before the students understood the purpose of a graphic organizer and demonstrated a fair understanding of the cognitive tool, I gave them a questionnaire that sought information about their acquaintance and exposure to English language and about the usefulness of graphic organizers (see Appendix A). Next, I familiarized the students with the structure of a graphic organizer and its function by using graphic organizers repeatedly in class. Once the students were able to follow the purpose of using a graphic organizer, I assigned them to complete a graphic organizer for a chapter from Nye's novel.

I explained the activity to the students so they could begin to fill in the circles and squares (see Figure 2) based on their reading of the chapter "Sight Seeing" in Nye's novel. "Sight Seeing" is about a man driving around San Antonio with his wife's cat. The cat missed the man when he was gone, so he drove around the Alamo city with the cat in his unwashed green car. I instructed the students to look for relationships between the words in the circles and squares. I consciously labeled words that belonged together so the students could understand the connections. For example, the adjectives *dusty* and *green* describe the car in the chapter. Then, they had to read the chapter to look for other words that were connected. Another example is fresh corn tortilla, which is eaten with scrambled eggs, fried onions, and peppers. So they connected fried onions and peppers to fresh corn tortilla because they are all foods.

Once the students listed the words and their connections, I explained to them the distinction between using mere text to understand connections between words in a paragraph and a graphic organizer for understanding the same connections in the text. After the students agreed to use the graphic organizer for understanding word links, I asked them to read another

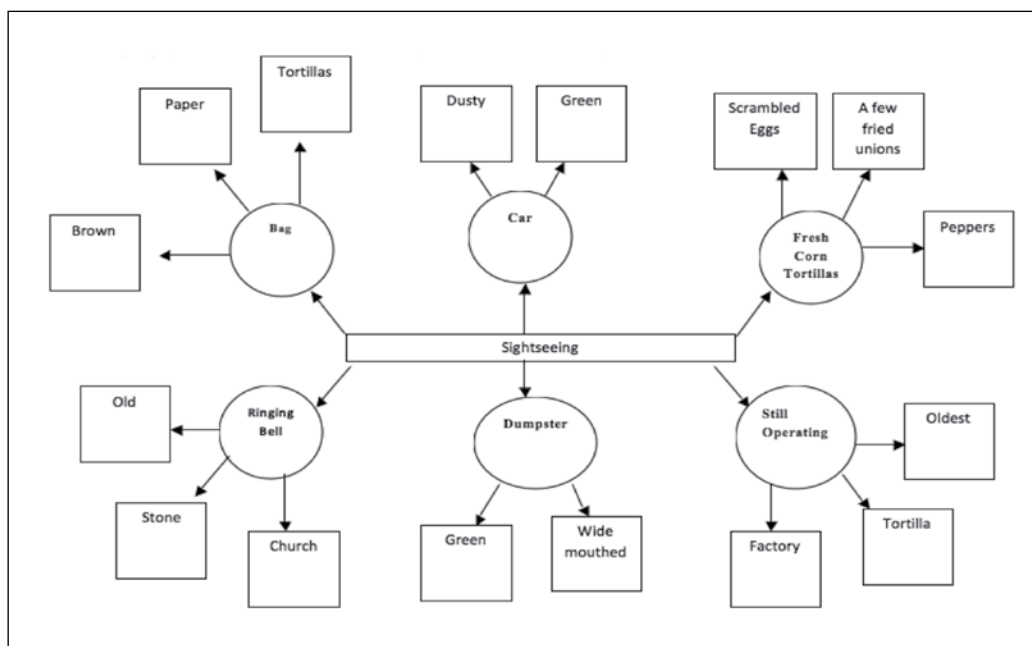


Figure 2. A graphic organizer provided to students.

chapter from the novel and design a graphic organizer based on the chapter.

The students were also asked to clarify certain culture- and religion-bound words like "tortilla" and "church." They were able to figure out that tortilla was a food item because it was grouped with fried onion and peppers and the chapter says, "There's nothing better than fresh corn tortillas with scrambled eggs and a few fried onions and peppers" (Nye, 2007, p. 75). The students were able to transfer their understanding of travel stories because this novel is about people driving and being driven. Using a novel that included the students' prior knowledge facilitated better understanding than using a text that was unfamiliar to international students. According to Nowacek (2011), "integrative learning encompasses a broad range of connections . . . [and] is part of transfer" (p. 2).

I observed that students had difficulties when asked to read the chapter and then underline the connections between concepts in a text. However, when provided with a graphic organizer, they were able to make connections between concepts (Tang, 1992). Although students seemed to struggle in the beginning, they succeeded with constant, coherent, and consistent practice using graphic organizers in class (Baxendell, 2003).

Students from multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational backgrounds bring rich funds of knowledge to the classroom (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 2001). These students have prior knowledge and schemata to read, write, and speak in their native languages, but they may lack the academic proficiency to read and write academic materials in the English language (Hudson, 2007; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). However, using graphic organizers conducive for their growth along with consistent and clear direction, students will eventually gain proficiency (Baxendell, 2003; Hawk, 2006; Tang, 1992).

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Appendix A

Please answer all of the following questions to the best of your knowledge.

1. Did you read books in English in your country?
Yes/ Maybe/ No
2. Did you understand words easily or did you use a dictionary?
Yes/ Sometimes/ No
3. Can you identify ideas in a text based on your reading of the text? Yes/ Maybe/ No
4. Do you think ideas are connected in a text? Yes/ Not sure/ No
5. Do you understand transitional expressions? Yes/ Maybe/ No
6. Do you think English class can help you with other classes you are taking? Yes/ No
7. Why did you enroll in EN 0301? It is required/ I want to improve my English language skills/ I had no choice
8. Did you know what a graphic organizer was? Yes/ No
9. Fill in the blank: Graphic organizers _____.
(helped/did not help).

If you answered “helped,” go to question 10. If you answered “did not help,” go to question 11.

10. How did the graphic organizer help you understand the texts you read? Write a brief response.
11. How did the graphic organizer **not** help you understand the text? Write a brief response.