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Teaching the Genre of Biography in Primary EFL Classrooms: A Multimodal, Scaffolded Approach

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Abstract

This article presents a multimodal and scaffolded instructional approach to teaching the genre of biography in a mixed-ability primary EFL classroom. Drawing on genre-based pedagogy, communicative language teaching, and principles of inclusive education, the lesson engages learners in discovering the structure, linguistic features, and communicative purpose of biographical texts. The teaching sequence integrates visual stimuli, guided lexical exploration, structured diagrams, collaborative text reconstruction, and formative self-assessment. The approach is designed for a combined Grade 5–6 classroom with diverse learning profiles, including students with special educational needs. Findings from classroom implementation indicate that multimodal input, explicit scaffolding, and cooperative learning significantly enhance learners' ability to identify biographical components, organize information chronologically, and use the Past Simple to describe past events. The article argues that biography is an effective genre for developing linguistic awareness, reading comprehension, and critical thinking in young EFL learners. Pedagogical implications for ELT practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: Biography; Genre-based pedagogy; Primary EFL; Multimodal learning; Inclusive teaching; Past Simple.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching young learners to understand and produce biographical texts offers rich opportunities for developing linguistic, cognitive, and literacy skills. Biographies combine chronological organization, factual information, and narrative elements, making them ideal for introducing learners to text structure, sequencing, and the Past Simple tense. In primary EFL contexts, genre awareness supports learners in recognizing how texts function and how meaning is constructed through predictable patterns.

The lesson described in this article was implemented in a combined Grade 5–6 classroom at a Primary School in a rural area in the town of Kavala, Greece. The class consists of sixteen learners with varying proficiency levels (A1–A2) and includes students with special educational needs, requiring

differentiated materials and structured support. The teaching design draws on multimodal input, collaborative learning, and scaffolded tasks to ensure accessibility and engagement for all learners.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Genre-based pedagogy provides a structured framework for teaching young learners how texts function, emphasizing explicit instruction in communicative purpose, organization, and linguistic features (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). In the case of biography, making conventional components – such as introduction, early life, achievements, and concluding legacy – visible helps learners understand sequencing and coherence. When combined with multimodal learning, which highlights how meaning is constructed through multiple semiotic modes including images, diagrams, videos, and embodied activity (Kress, 2010), students engage with content through diverse sensory channels that support comprehension and retention. In mixed-ability classrooms, inclusive and differentiated instruction is essential: structured roles in group work, leveled worksheets, and step-by-step scaffolding ensure that all learners, including those with special educational needs, can access the genre and participate meaningfully (Tomlinson, 2014). Together, these pedagogical pillars create a supportive environment where young EFL learners can decode, analyze, and reconstruct biographical texts while developing linguistic awareness and collaborative skills.

3. LESSON DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The lesson was designed as a scaffolded, multimodal sequence that gradually guides learners from initial observation to deeper genre awareness. It begins with a visual stimulus showing the same person at different ages, prompting learners to discuss physical and life changes and infer that the images represent a life story (Appendix - Class Worksheet). The visual material is taken directly from the educational YouTube video used later in the lesson, ensuring continuity between the introductory activity and the subsequent multimodal input. This choice was intentional: the video provides clear, child-friendly illustrations of life stages, making it easier for learners to activate prior knowledge, recognize chronological progression, and connect the initial observation task with the broader concept of biography. Through guided questioning, students are led to discover the term *biography*, activating vocabulary related to age, change, and life events and preparing them for genre exploration. Learners then work collaboratively to construct a definition of “biography” using key words such as *story*, *real person*, *life*, *true facts*, *events*, *order*, and *happened*. This lexical and conceptual task reinforces the factual nature of biographical texts and helps students articulate the communicative purpose of the genre. To deepen structural understanding, learners watch a short educational YouTube video that explains the three main parts of a biography – introduction and early life, body, and conclusion – and then complete two diagrams of increasing complexity to categorize information. This scaffolded progression supports comprehension, encourages comparison, and strengthens learners’ ability to identify how ideas are sequenced in biographical writing. The lesson culminates in a collaborative text-reconstruction activity in which students reassemble a biography of Greek children’s literature author Marina Gioti by arranging four paragraphs in the correct order and adding appropriate titles. To design this activity, I drew on factual information from the short biographical notes printed on the back covers of her books, ensuring that the material was authentic, age-appropriate, and directly connected to texts familiar to the learners. Each learner assumes a specific role (Organizer, Glue Manager, Title Writer, Presenter), promoting responsibility, cooperation, and purposeful engagement with the genre. Marina Gioti was selected because her books had recently been donated to the school by a local sponsor as part of the school’s reading-promotion programme, and, following this donation, the school collaborated with a local bookstore to invite the author for an in-person literacy event. This authentic connection to the school community increased learners’ motivation, provided cultural relevance, and strengthened the pedagogical value of working with a biography of an author they had met and whose books they had explored.

4. DISCUSSION

The lesson demonstrates how multimodal and scaffolded instruction can effectively support genre learning in primary EFL contexts. Visual stimuli help learners conceptualize life stages, while guided lexical tasks promote semantic connections. The use of diagrams and videos supports comprehension of abstract structural concepts. Collaborative reconstruction of a real biography fosters deeper engagement and encourages learners to articulate reasoning.

Importantly, the approach accommodates mixed-ability learners. Differentiated worksheets, structured roles, and clear task sequences ensure that students with special educational needs can participate meaningfully. The emphasis on Past Simple within authentic contexts strengthens grammatical awareness and reinforces the connection between form and meaning.

The biography genre also promotes critical thinking: learners compare information, identify relevance, and understand how achievements contribute to a person's legacy. These skills extend beyond language learning and support broader literacy development.

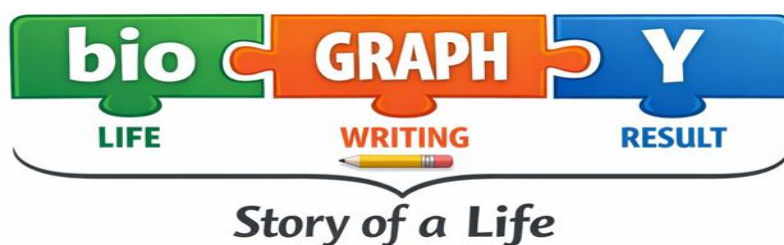
5. CONCLUSION

Teaching biography through multimodal, scaffolded, and collaborative activities enhances learners' genre awareness, linguistic competence, and critical thinking. The lesson described here demonstrates that even young EFL learners can successfully analyze and reconstruct biographical texts when provided with structured support and engaging materials. Biography is a powerful genre for integrating vocabulary, grammar, sequencing, and comprehension in primary ELT. Future research may explore how learners transfer these skills to producing their own biographical texts.

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Appendix -Class worksheet



Task 1. What is a biography? Take a look at the above picture and complete a definition using the following words!

story – real – person – life – true – facts – events – order – happened

A **biography** is a _____ about a _____. It tells _____ and important _____ in the _____ they _____.

Task 2. The basic parts of a biography.

A GOOD BIOGRAPHY INCLUDES

Introduction: _____

Conclusion: _____



Task 3. What do we write in each part?

<u>Part of the biography</u>	<u>Information</u>
Introduction and early life	- Who the biography is about _____ and _____ they were born - Interesting facts about their _____, _____ or young _____. - If they had _____, _____ or life _____ that helped them to become who they would be.
Body	Important _____
Conclusion	- When and where they _____ - If they are still _____ - The _____ things for which they will be remembered

Task 4. Work in groups! Put the paragraphs in the correct order and add titles.

First, all members **silently read** the four paragraphs of the biography. Then **discuss together** what information each paragraph gives (Introduction, Early Life, Important contributions, Conclusion / What they will be remembered for). Decide as a team the **correct order** of the paragraphs and **glue them** on your paper. After that, write **an appropriate title** for each paragraph. To complete the task smoothly, each group assigns **four roles**:

1. the **Organizer**, who guides the discussion and helps the team decide the correct order;
2. the **Glue Manager**, who is responsible for placing and sticking the paragraphs and speech bubbles neatly on the paper;
3. the **Title Writer**, who writes the titles clearly and correctly;
4. and the **Presenter**, who explains the group's choices to the class.

Marina Gioti also wrote several award-winning books. One of the most loved is *Yeti, the power of yet*, which teaches children not to give up and to keep trying. Another popular book is *The Never-Never Island*, a story full of imagination and adventure. Her book, *Talk to me* helps children understand feelings and communication. Her latest book, *Escape from the Land of "Cannot"*, invites older children to discover the power of believing in themselves and to overcome the fears that hold them back. Many of her books have been translated into other languages and are often found on best-seller lists.

She was born in Athens and studied Marketing and Fine Arts in the United States. Later, she also studied design and illustration in New York. Before becoming a writer, she worked in advertising and won important awards for her creative work.

Marina Gioti is a well-known Greek author and illustrator of children's books.

Her first book, *The Little Moment*, was published in 2014 and became very popular with children. After that, she wrote many more books, such as *The Little Moment is Strong!* and the series *Fairy Tales...differently*, where she retells classic fairy tales in a fun and modern way.

Today, Marina Gioti continues to write, illustrate, and visit schools, inspiring children to read, dream, and believe in themselves.



Are we talking about things that are happening **now** or things that happened in the **past**?

What do the verbs in a biography tell us about **when the events happened**?

How well did I learn about biographies?

💬 Question	😊 Yes! I got it!	😊 Almost there!	😞 I need to try again!
1 I can explain what a biography is.	☐	☐	☐
2 I know the main parts of a biography (introduction, body, conclusion).	☐	☐	☐
3 I can say what information goes in each part (early life, achievements, later life).	☐	☐	☐
4 I can find the verbs and tell that a biography is written in the past tense.	☐	☐	☐
5 I can read and understand a short biography (like Marina Gioti's).	☐	☐	☐

Write one sentence about what you liked most in today's lesson!
