

A MODEL FOR ANALYTICAL AND SEMIOTIC READING FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: *Literary analysis in the context of foreign language education is often confined to surface-level comprehension of plot and character. This paper proposes an innovative model for analytical and semiotic reading tailored to university-level ESL learners. Drawing on Kumral's three-tiered framework — literal, symbolic, and critical reading — the model encourages a deeper engagement with literary texts. It is further enriched by Bradford's emphasis on the reader as an active co-creator of meaning and the need to analyse multimodal elements such as cultural references, rhetorical devices, and textual structures. Grounded in Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign, the semiotic dimension of the model positions literature as a system of culturally encoded signs. Through a close examination of five short stories by O. Henry, the study demonstrates how symbolic objects, narrative irony, and stylistic features function as semiotic tools, enabling a deeper cultural interpretation and fostering reader agency. The model offers a pedagogically sound approach to developing critical literacy and intercultural competence in foreign language contexts.*

Keywords: *Critical skills, Semiotics, Analytical Reading, Intercultural Competence, Model*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of university-level foreign language education, there is a growing need for reading models that go beyond surface-level comprehension and actively engage students in interpretation, cultural analysis, and critical thinking. Traditional approaches to literature often focus on vocabulary and plot, which, while necessary, do not equip learners with the tools to understand a text's deeper symbolic and ideological layers. This gap is especially pronounced for ESL students, who should overcome not only linguistic challenges but also the cultural and stylistic nuances of original English texts. The proposed model addresses this need by offering a structured yet flexible framework that integrates comprehension with analytical and semiotic reading. By guiding students through literal, symbolic, and critical levels of interpretation, the model supports both linguistic development and the cultivation of intercultural competence—two essential skills for 21st-century learners in global academic and professional environments.

DISCUSSION

In general, comprehension reading, which focuses on surface-level interpretation of texts, primarily emphasises plot, character, and vocabulary acquisition, and is valuable for developing language comprehension. However, it often fails to harness the deeper interpretive and cultural dimensions of literature. The described model addresses this gap by proposing a comprehensive approach to analytical and semiotic reading, designed explicitly for university-level ESL (English as a Second Language) learners.

The model's foundation lies in the framework introduced by Kumral (Kumral, 2022), which conceptualises reading as a three-tiered process. At the first level, students engage with the literal content of the text — identifying characters, events, and basic narrative structures. The second level introduces symbolic interpretation, encouraging learners to uncover implicit meanings, emotional subtexts, and metaphorical language. Finally, the third level — the critical stage — challenges students to question underlying ideologies, cultural assumptions, and social constructs embedded in the text. This structured progression not only deepens textual understanding but also cultivates interpretative autonomy and critical thinking skills.

Complementing Kumral's model is Bradford's (Bradford, 2025) work, which argues that meaning in literature is co-constructed by readers and shaped by their cultural, cognitive, and linguistic frameworks. She emphasises the multimodal nature of reading — one that involves not only decoding words but also recognising allusions, rhetorical devices, genre conventions, and intertextual links. Bradford's insights

expand the analytical model by incorporating the reader's perspective as a vital element of meaning-making and cultural negotiation.

From a semiotic perspective, this paper also draws on Ferdinand de Saussure's (Saussure, 1959) foundational theory of the linguistic sign, which defines meaning as the relationship between the *signifier* (sound image) and the *signified* (concept). This relational understanding of language shifts the focus from what words *mean* in isolation to how they *function* within a cultural system of signs. These three perspectives on reading are described in Figure 1 (Fig.1).

The stories of O. Henry serve as an ideal corpus for applying this model. Known for their rich use of irony, symbolic objects, and narrative reversals, his texts offer fertile ground for multi-layered analysis. Through close reading of five selected stories, the study demonstrates how literary elements such as irony, imagery, metaphor, and repetition serve not only as stylistic tools but also as semiotic carriers of deeper meaning. Objects like a leaf, a safe, or a missed opportunity serve as signs within the narrative, through which complex cultural and emotional themes are communicated.

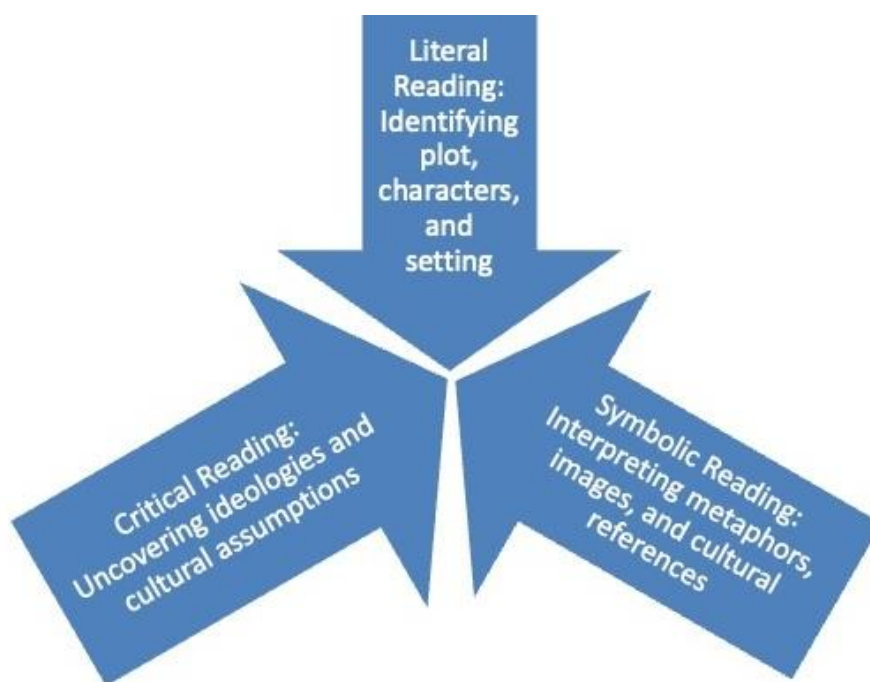


Fig. 1. Three perspectives on reading

Ultimately, the proposed model integrates analytical structure with semiotic insight to offer a pedagogically grounded method for enhancing critical literacy and intercultural competence in foreign language settings. It empowers students to read not only for what the text says, but for what it *does*. How it constructs meaning, invites interpretation, and positions the reader within a broader cultural discourse.

ESL students should first engage with strong reading comprehension, which is the first stage in the suggested four-tiered model (Fig.2)—including vocabulary development and structural clarity — students may overlook key cues necessary for deeper interpretation. Therefore, before moving on to symbolic or critical analysis, it is essential to ensure that learners have a clear understanding of what is happening on the surface level of the text. Comprehension serves as the foundation on which all subsequent analytical and semiotic work must be built.

Then, the proposed model for analytical reading is built on the analytical reading framework described by Kumral (Kumral, 2022): reading within the text, across the text, and against the text. Each stage of this process offers a distinct type of cognitive engagement with the literary text, guiding the reader from basic comprehension to a deeper understanding of cultural and critical aspects. Bradford (Bradford, 2025) complements this model by stating that meaning is not entirely contained within words but arises through the interaction between the text and the reader, including cultural codes, personal experiences, and context.

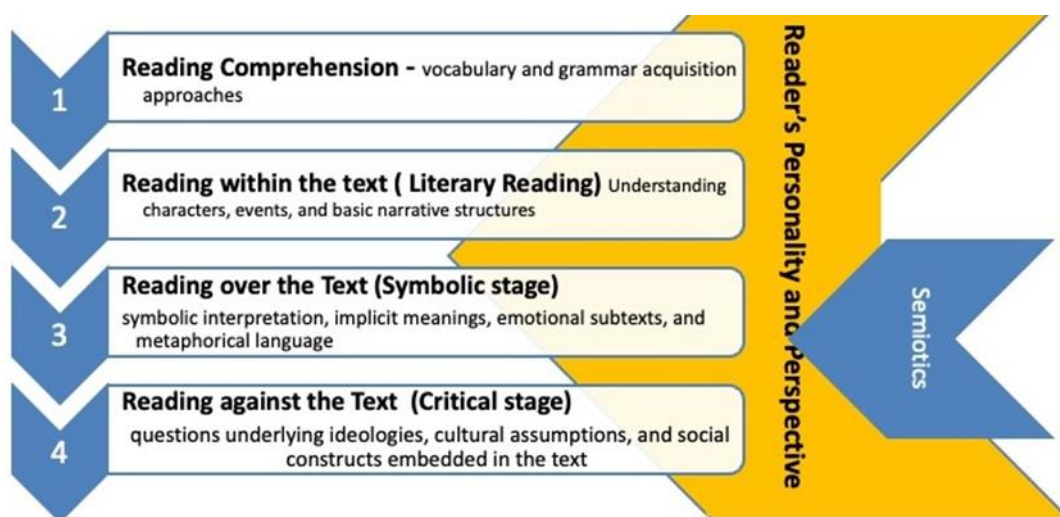


Fig.2. Four-tiered suggested model for analytical and semiotic reading

At the second level (Fig.2) — **reading within the text** — the reader focuses on the literal content: plot, characters, actions. This is the stage of recognition and reception, in which the basic narrative framework is constructed. Kumral defines it as the “semantic level,” where the story’s primary context is extracted. Questions asked here include: “What happens?”, “Who does what?”, and “What are the consequences of the characters’ actions?” This initial engagement is essential for subsequent symbolic and critical reading, as it establishes the story’s reference points.

The third level (Fig.2) — **reading the text** — focuses on the symbolic meanings behind actions and objects. Here, the reader begins to interpret and attribute cultural and emotional significance to what was initially perceived. Kumral describes this stage as the “evaluative level,” in which the reader begins to recognise themes such as self-sacrifice, moral transformation, love, and alienation. According to Bradford, this is the moment when the reader activates their cultural capital to interpret the text's signs through a prism shaped by their personal experience and values. Allusions, symbols, and metaphors deepen the interpretation here.

At the fourth level (Fig.2) — **reading against the text** — critical thinking is activated. The reader does not simply accept the meanings proposed by the text; instead, they question them. This includes identifying ideologies, hidden assumptions, role models, and social constructs. Kumral defines this as the “critical level,” where questions such as “What values does the text promote?”, “Does it uphold certain stereotypes?” or “Which cultural attitudes are normalised through the narrative?” are addressed. Bradford adds that this stage is key for developing academic and intercultural literacy, as it allows the reader not only to interpret but also to transform the text through their own interpretation.

This model is not linear but somewhat cyclical and reflexive — each new reading can activate a different level depending on the reader's context, experience, and expectations. Thus, the model combines analytical rigour with interpretative freedom, making it especially suitable for working with short stories such as those by O. Henry, where every detail carries the potential for deep meaning.

► **Semiotic Analysis of Stylistic Devices** - The semiotic approach to literary text requires not only the identification of symbols within the narrative but also awareness of the role of linguistic and stylistic devices as carriers of culturally coded meaning. It can be introduced in parallel with stages three and four (Fig. 2) as inquiries on the symbolic meaning of the devices for students to think about. Stylistic figures in O. Henry’s stories do not merely serve expressive purposes — they function as signs that convey values, social roles, and ideologies.

► **Irony** is one of the most distinctive features of O. Henry's style and plays a semiotic role by opposing the reader’s expectations to the text’s final meaning. It signals the gap between what is visible and what is essential — between literal action and its moral or emotional significance. This tension between surface reading and profound cultural message transforms irony into a cultural sign. For example, in the story “*The Cop and the Anthem*”, the protagonist's attempts to get arrested fail precisely at the moment he

experiences moral awakening. The reader is faced with a situation in which the cultural logic of "redemption" turns against itself.

► **Imagery** in O. Henry's texts builds visual and sensory signs that often go beyond description and become symbolic structures. Phrases like "*the leaf that does not fall*" in "*The Last Leaf*" or "*the telephone that connects two fates*" in "*The Romance of a Busy Broker*" do not merely describe actions but create signs charged with cultural and emotional meaning. Such figures cannot be fully understood without considering their artistic and literary context — they imply comparison with biblical, mythological, or social archetypes.

► **Alliteration, repetition, and rhythmic structures** also contribute to constructing the semiotic field of the text. They not only create a phonetic effect but also reinforce a sense of cyclicity, persistence, or tension. Repetition of specific phrases or constructions — especially in the description of routine or poverty — gains the function of a rhetorical sign symbolising social stagnation or personal resilience. Thus, the form of expression becomes its own content.

► **Metaphors and similes** transform the literal into the symbolic, creating intertextual connections with universal themes such as self-sacrifice, moral redemption, and spiritual awakening. When a female character is compared to a queen or a biblical figure, this is not merely admiration — it reflects social attitudes about the woman's role and values that go beyond the individual and relate to culturally shaped archetypes.

In this sense, a stylistic analysis conducted from a semiotic perspective not only reveals the text's formal qualities but also opens the possibility of interpreting language as a cultural code. In O. Henry's stories, style is not just a means of conveying content — it is the content itself. Language becomes a stage where social tensions, value conflicts, and moral transformations unfold.

CONCLUSION

The proposed model (Fig.2) for analytical and semiotic reading offers a structured and pedagogically sound approach to engaging with literary texts in the context of foreign language education. By moving through three progressive levels — literal, symbolic, and critical — it equips students not only with comprehension skills but also with the ability to uncover deeper cultural meanings, rhetorical strategies, and ideological underpinnings embedded in narrative texts.

The use of O. Henry's short stories has demonstrated the model's effectiveness, as these texts encapsulate complex cultural and moral themes within concise literary forms. Elements such as irony, symbolic gestures, and recurring objects become key to understanding characters' inner transformations and the broader societal values they reflect.

The model was piloted with **53 university-level ESL students**, and **31 of them showed measurable improvement** in both their reading comprehension and interpretive depth. Their written assignments and oral discussions indicated a growing capacity to analyse symbolism, identify cultural codes, and engage critically with the text. These results highlight the model's potential not only to enhance linguistic competence but also to foster critical literacy and intercultural awareness.

Ultimately, this model reframes reading as an active, reflective, and interpretive process. It empowers students to move beyond passive consumption of texts toward becoming culturally informed, critically engaged readers — a skill increasingly essential in diverse academic and social contexts.

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