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Schema Activation in Literary Interpretation: A Study on the Words of Wisdom in *Tuesdays with Morrie*

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Abstract – Literary works often convey moral lessons that invite readers to reflect on life experiences. However, few studies have examined how readers interpret such messages through a psycholinguistic lens. This research explores how students interpret Morrie Schwartz's words in Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* through the framework of Schema Theory. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 16 students of the English Language and Culture Department at University of Al-Azhar Indonesia. Informants were presented with 20 selected quotes and asked to choose those most meaningful to them, explain their feelings, and reflect on the relevance to their lives. The findings reveal that the most memorable quotes were "Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others," "Love wins. Love always wins," and "Life is a series of pulls back and forth.". These quotes activated language schema (simplicity and clarity of expression), content schema (personal experiences and values), and formal schema (use of repetition, parallelism, or paradox). By contrast, less chosen quotes, such as those on aging, were not relatable to the students' current experiences. The study highlights the significance of Schema Theory in psycholinguistic analysis of literature, showing how readers connect language, structure, and personal knowledge to create meaning.

Keywords – Psycholinguistics, Schema Theory, Tuesdays With Morrie

INTRODUCTION

Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* is a memoir that conveys the final lessons of Morrie Schwartz, a dying professor who shares his wisdom on life, love, forgiveness, and human values. The book is widely regarded not only as a literary work but also as a source of moral and emotional reflection for readers across cultures. Morrie's words are often short, metaphorical, and emotional, which makes them memorable and open to interpretation. The way readers understand and internalize these messages can vary depending on their personal experiences, cultural background, and cognitive frameworks.

Previous studies have analyzed *Tuesdays with Morrie* from various perspectives. Prajayani [1] examined the memoir through a humanistic

psychological lens, highlighting Morrie's character as a model of self-acceptance and personal growth. Meanwhile, Gamelia [2] focused on the moral and ethical lessons in the text, emphasizing its role in teaching values of love, compassion, and gratitude. These studies mainly explored the thematic and philosophical aspects of the memoir. However, little research has examined how readers themselves interpret Morrie's words through a psycholinguistic perspective. Previous analyses have tended to focus on what Morrie said rather than on how readers construct meaning from his words.

This study seeks to explore how readers, particularly students of English Language and Culture, interpret Morrie's quotes using Schema Theory as the framework. Schema Theory posits that individuals comprehend new information by activating existing knowledge structures, which can be classified into language schema, content schema, and formal

schema [3,4,5]. Schema Theory is the knowledge and experiences people gradually build over time, which shape the way they think and understand. Whether consciously or not, individuals depend on these existing schemas to interpret and give meaning to the world around them [6,7,8,9].

By examining students' responses to Morrie's words, this research aims to identify which quotes resonate most strongly and why, as well as how language, background knowledge, and rhetorical form influence interpretation. The goal of this research is to describe and analyze how students connect Morrie's words to their own lives and experiences through the activation of schemas. It investigates which themes are most impactful for young readers, and why some messages are less memorable.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the field of psycholinguistics and literary interpretation. First, it provides insight into how language and cognitive frameworks interact in shaping the meaning of literary texts. Second, it highlights the pedagogical value of using literature to foster reflection on universal human experiences. Finally, the study demonstrates the usefulness of Schema Theory as a tool for analyzing how readers engage with texts, offering a bridge between linguistic analysis, psychology, and literary studies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative research method, which is an approach that explores social reality through natural language rather than numbers or statistical models [10,11]. The qualitative approach was chosen because the main objective of the study was to explore and describe how readers interpret Morrie's words in *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Rather than measuring numerical outcomes, the study focused on the informants' perceptions, feelings, and personal connections to Morrie's quotes [12,13].

The research was conducted from 25 until 28 September, 2025. Data were collected on September 25th, 2025 through semi-structured interviews with 16 students from the English Language and Culture Department at University of Al-Azhar Indonesia. During the interviews, informants were presented with a list of twenty selected quotes from Morrie. They were asked to choose one to three quotes that they found most meaningful, explain how these

quotes made them feel, and reflect on their relevance to their own life. Additional questions invited informants to consider whether Morrie's words could inspire people to love life more, and whether his short, metaphorical, and emotional style made the quotes easier to remember. Each interview was audio-recorded with the informants' consent, and later transcribed for analysis.

The responses were analyzed on September 26th, 2025 to September 28th, 2025 using Wenying's Schema Theory as the theoretical framework, focusing on three types of schemas: language schema, content schema, and formal schema. Informants' explanations were coded and categorized according to these schema types to reveal how linguistic simplicity, personal background knowledge, and rhetorical features influenced their interpretation. In addition, the number of times a particular quote was selected was noted as supporting quantitative data to identify which quotes were most frequently considered meaningful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After conducting an interview with the 16 informants, the result is shown in Figure 1.

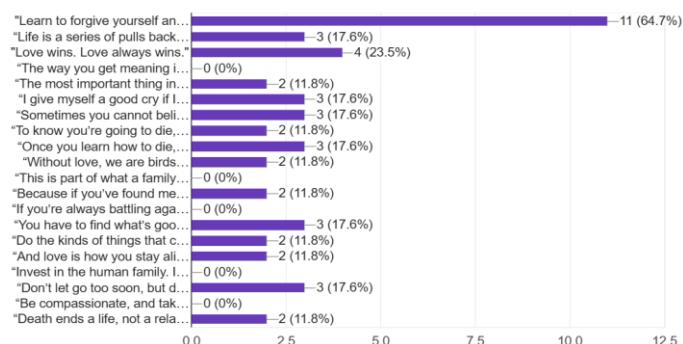


Figure 1. the most frequently chosen quotes from *Tuesdays with Morrie*

According to the Schema Theory by Wenying, schema can be understood as the gradually accumulated structures of knowledge and experience that shape human cognition. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals rely on these existing schemas to interpret and make sense of the world. Schema is generally classified into three types: language schema, which refers to the linguistic knowledge of vocabulary and grammar; content schema, which involves background knowledge and personal experience; and formal schema, which

relates to the awareness of text structure, rhetorical devices, and genre conventions.

Since Morrie's words are often short, metaphorical, and emotional, informants interpreted them by activating different types of schemas. Their responses show how existing knowledge and experiences helped them connect with the quotes. This discussion focuses on the three most frequently chosen quotes.

The first quote is "Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others." From the 16 informants, 11 have chosen this quote. This indicates that the theme of forgiveness resonates strongly with the readers. From the perspective of language schema, the simple imperative structure ("Learn to...") makes the statement direct, instructional, and easy to understand, even for those who may not be familiar with the full context of the book. Meanwhile, the content schema was activated when informants connected the quote to their own personal experiences. Many of them reflected on past conflicts, feelings of guilt, or mistakes, and explained how the message reminded them of the importance of reconciliation. Finally, the formal schema can be seen in the use of parallel structure ("yourself" and "others"), which emphasizes balance and reciprocity in the act of forgiving, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Schema Theory on "Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive other."

Quotes	Schema	Explanation
"Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others."	Language	Simple imperative form ("Learn to...") made it easy to understand. Linked to the informants' personal experiences of conflict, guilt, and reconciliation.
	Content	
	Formal	Parallel structure emphasized balance and reciprocity.

The reason forgiveness resonates so deeply is because it reflects a universal psychological process. Toussaint et al. define forgiveness as a decrease in negative and an increase in positive thoughts, feelings, and motivations toward an offender, oneself, or another [14]. It means that forgiving is not simply a moral action, but also an emotional shift that reduces resentment and fosters inner peace. In

this study, informants related strongly to Morrie's words because forgiveness touched their own struggles with conflict and their desire for reconciliation.

The second quote is "Love wins. Love always wins." From the 16 informants, 4 have chosen this quote. As shown in Table 2, this short but powerful statement emphasizes the supremacy of love over other values. In terms of language schema, the quote employs very basic and universal vocabulary, which makes it easily accessible and understood by readers of different backgrounds. The content schema was activated when informants related the quote to personal experiences of family bonds, friendships, and emotional support, highlighting love as a central value in their lives. The formal schema is evident in the use of repetition ("Love wins") which reinforces certainty, creates rhythm, and makes the message memorable.

Table 2. Schema Theory on "Love wins. Love always wins."

Quotes	Schema	Explanation
"Love wins. Love always wins."	Language	Basic vocabulary made it universally accessible.
	Content	Linked to the informants' personal experiences of conflict, guilt, and reconciliation.
	Formal	Parallel structure emphasized balance and reciprocity.

The reason informants felt connected to this quote is because love is universally recognized as a fundamental human need. The need to give and receive love is deeply embedded in human nature, shaping not only relationships but also one's sense of self and overall well-being [15]. This perspective emphasizes that love is not only an emotional state but also a core force of human life, which helps explain why Morrie's words "Love wins" resonated so strongly with the informants.

The third quote is "Life is a series of pulls back and forth. You want to do one thing, but you are bound to do something else. Something hurts you, yet you know it shouldn't. You take certain things for granted, even when you know you should never take anything for granted." From the 16 informants, 3 have chosen this quote. As displayed in Table 3, this quote was interpreted as a realistic description of the

tensions and contradictions in daily life. In terms of language schema, the use of accessible vocabulary and contrastive structures (“want to... but...”, “hurts you... yet...”) makes the message easy to process, while the metaphor of “pulls back and forth” creates a vivid image of struggle. The content schema was activated when informants connected the quote to their own dilemmas, such as balancing academic responsibilities with family commitments, or managing emotional ups and downs. The formal schema can also be observed in the use of paradox (“hurts you... yet you know it shouldn’t”) and repetition (“take... for granted”), which highlighted the contradictory yet repetitive nature of life’s challenges.

Table 3. Schema Theory on “Life is a series of pulls back and forth. ...”

Quotes	Schema	Explanation
“Life is a series of pulls back and forth. You want to do one thing, but you are bound to do something else.	Language	Basic vocabulary made it universally accessible. Linked to the informants’ personal experiences of conflict, guilt, and reconciliation.
Something hurts you, yet you know it shouldn’t. You take certain things for granted, even when you know you should never take anything for granted.	Content	Parallel structure emphasized balance and reciprocity.
	Formal	

The reason informants related strongly to this quote is because it reflects a universal human experience of internal conflict and decision-making. Informants easily connected Morrie’s words to their own experiences of competing demands and emotions. As Gaba and Joseph note, decision-making often arises from tensions between opposing goals and values, which supports the view that Morrie’s metaphor captures the constant negotiation people face in daily life [16].

The table 3 presents the most selected quotes from Morrie alongside the types of schemas activated in informants’ responses. The rest of the quotes were less memorable because they lacked rhetorical devices, did not directly connect to students’ personal experiences, or used more abstract

language. As a result, they did not strongly activate content, language, or formal schema.

One example is Morrie’s reflection: “If you’re always battling against getting older, you’re always going to be unhappy, because it will happen anyhow.” with no votes due to aging being a pressing issue for young informants. Age stereotypes are often placed on the negative side, with older adults more commonly associated with decline and loss rather than growth [17]. This explains why students may have found the quote less memorable, as their existing schema of aging contrasted with Morrie’s more accepting and positive view.

CONCLUSION

The quote “Learn to forgive yourself and to forgive others” demonstrated how simple imperative structures, personal experiences with guilt and reconciliation, and rhetorical balance made the message memorable and meaningful. Similarly, “Love wins. Love always wins” reflected the universality of love as a human need, with repetition reinforcing its certainty and emotional impact. Finally, “Life is a series of pulls back and forth. ...” resonated with the informants’ because it reflected their lived experiences of conflict and decision-making, with paradox and repetition enhancing its rhetorical power. These findings confirm that a combination of linguistic simplicity, emotional depth, and personal relevance is most effective in engaging readers.

By contrast, quotes that focused on themes more distant from the informants’ realities, such as aging, were less memorable. These did not strongly activate content schema and lacked rhetorical devices that could otherwise enhance their impact. For instance, Morrie’s reflection on battling aging was not selected by any informants, reflecting how young adults often perceive aging as an abstract or negative concept, which contrasts with Morrie’s more accepting view.

Overall, this research demonstrates the value of Schema Theory in explaining how readers interpret and connect with literary texts. It highlights that the most impactful messages are those that activate multiple schemas simultaneously, linking language, personal experience, and rhetorical structure. Morrie’s wisdom continues to resonate across contexts because his words speak to universal

values, but their impact depends on how closely readers' existing schemas align with the themes expressed.

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