Narrative Tasks in Communicative Language Learning

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An important challenge for communicative language teaching today is to find ways to allow learners to express their ideas and experiences within the confines of the classroom, in order to prepare them for communicating in the outside world. This paper argues that one effective way of doing this is through using carefully developed narrative tasks. Based on a review of the descriptive literature on conversational narrative, this paper proposes some principles for improving the tasks found in textbooks. The paper then reports on a preliminary study of the effects of using these tasks, compared to those found in popular texts today.

今日のコミュニケーションに関する英語教育の重要な要素の一つは、教室外でも使えるコミュニケーション力を備えるようにすることである。そのためには、特に授業の中で生徒が自分の考え方や出来事を英語で表現することが出来るようにする方法を見付けることである。本文では、その一つの効果的な方法として、一つの筋を持った話から成る課題の使用を提案する。又、談話文節の文献に基づいて幾つかの会話形式である物語のタスクと、日本人生徒がそのタスクを使用した際の効果に関する結果を紹介する。

Introduction

Stories are to be found everywhere, and as Wajnryb (2003) suggests, are a natural medium for learning. Becoming bilingual, or bicultural, involves encountering new cultural narratives. Learning a new language should also mean learning to be able to tell your side of the story, thereby establishing an identity in that language. More practically a talent for conversational storytelling is a widely appreciated social skill (McCarthy, 1991) likely to benefit learners in interactions with other users of the target language. This paper suggests ways to develop this skill within the foreign language classroom.

Learning to speak a language requires not simply the acquisition of an abstract code, but the development of skills in using the target language in social communication. For many Japanese learners who have few opportunities to use English outside the classroom, truly communicative

learning must involve both cognitive and social use within the classroom. An important reason for teaching learners to tell their own stories is to prepare them for storytelling in the outside world. This can perhaps be done by carefully designing tasks based on what is known about the occurrence and organisation of conversational narrative.

What is a narrative task?

A narrative task is one in which learners produce a story within the framework set up by the task. In practice, this usually means retelling a story provided by the researcher, teacher, or textbook. Typical stimuli are picture sequences, video or audio recordings, or written texts. In research and testing, storytelling tasks are popular, because narrative is a useful medium for eliciting extended speech from learners (e.g. Skehan, 2001). In EFL textbooks, storytelling tasks tend to be restricted to lessons on the past tense, incorporating simple discourse conjunctions such as *and then, so*, or *after that*. However, narrative tasks are also potentially opportunities to prepare learners to tell stories in the outside world.

Textbook narrative tasks

Textbook tasks provide learners with plenty of support in storytelling, but in so doing, tend to become display activities lacking the emotional involvement of a conversational narrative. A typical example is provided by a task entitled "To Catch a Thief" in *Interchange I* (Richards, Hull, and Proctor, 1990, p. 67). The task consists of a newspaper style report followed by a jumbled series of pictures depicting the episodes of the narrative. The story is about an athletic woman who uses her karate skills to apprehend a thief who breaks into her house.

The task consists of two stages:

1. Read the article and number the pictures.
2. Cover the article and retell the story using the pictures.

The important features are a source story providing vocabulary (such as *karate kick*), and pictures supporting the retelling, encouraging one utterance per picture. Tasks like this are attractive, particularly when teaching lower level students, because they are highly supportive. However, for what purpose are learners completing this kind of task? Unlike many tasks, such as giving and following directions using maps, this activity does not seem to have any obvious real world application. (Perhaps this is why no such narrative activities appear in the current edition of *Interchange I*.)

Ellis (2003) singles out narrative tasks as lacking authenticity:

> …there are many tasks that have been used by both researchers and teachers which are patently not real-world. For example telling a story based on a series of pictures…Such tasks, however can be said to manifest 'some sort of relationship to the real world' (Skehan 1996) in that they could possibly occur outside the classroom but more especially because the kind of language behaviour they elicit corresponds to the kind of communicative behaviour that arises from performing real world tasks. (Ellis, 2003, p.6)

Ellis (2003) acknowledges a problem with the authenticity of narrative retelling tasks, but does not suggest a solution. The relationship between tasks and the world implied by

Ellis (2003) and Skehan (1996, in Ellis, 2003) is, presumably, cognitive. In other words, doing narrative tasks, such as the one described above, cognitively replicates the telling of a conversational story. However conversational storytelling is as much a social skill as a cognitive one, and narrative tasks should perhaps take this into account.

Narratives in everyday conversation

Although the relationship between narrative tasks and conversational narrative has not (to my knowledge) been studied, conversational narrative has been widely researched from a variety of perspectives that might inform pedagogy. Labov and Waletzky (1967) describe a six part model of personal oral narratives, and Sacks' 1960s lectures (in Jefferson (Ed.), 1995) offer a wealth of insights into narrative in conversation. Important refinements and developments in conversational narrative description are to be found in Eggins and Slade (1997), Norrick (2000), and Ochs and Capps (2001). Toolan (2001) provides a well referenced overview of narrative theory in general. Overall, the literature highlights a number of features that are not being developed by the simple repetition of a given narrative. Some prominent features of conversational narrative include the following:

- Personalisation
- Justification
- Listener support (backchannel)
- Performance features (dramatisation)
- Other features (collaborative tellings, story rounds, sub-genres)

Personalisation

Unlike the storytelling task described above, stories in conversation are typically personal, because people use them to shape and share their experiences (Ochs and Capps, 2001). Even recounting the events of a film or book will inevitably be done in a way reflecting the teller's attitudes.

Justification

Since stories monopolise the conversation, the narrator must negotiate a speaking turn, justifying the story's relevance to the ongoing conversation or the listener (see Sacks in Jefferson (Ed.), 1995). More generally, the story is oriented to the listener(s) as it unfolds. Conversational narratives tend to be told for a reason, and have some point to them. As Labov (1997) asserts, storytellers are constantly on guard to avoid the potential reaction of *So what?* Even stories which, to outsiders, may seem mundane, often serve both as a way for people to 'get up to date' with each other, and reinforce shared attitudes (Ochs and Capps, 2001).

Listener support (backchannel)

The listener also plays a part in conversational narratives through backchannel fillers such as *right*, *oh yeah?*, or *I see*; encouragement: *go on…*, or *then what happened?*; interpretative feedback: *It sounds like the class went well*; or queries: *Did you enjoy it?* This kind of feedback can help narrators shape their story to their listener, and may be particularly important for learners lacking confidence in their understanding as listeners, or effectiveness as narrators.

Performance features (dramatisation)

In a certain kind of informal conversational narrative, a number of dramatic features, known as *performance features*, have

been observed (e.g. Wolfson, 1978). These include reported speech, sound effects, gestures, exaggeration, and use of the conversational historical present. Since the high involvement of such narratives is so different from the monotone recounts of learners using retelling tasks, such narratives represent a particular challenge for learners and their teachers.

Other features of conversational storytelling

Stories are sometimes told as collaborations (for example by couples). They are also told in rounds, so that if one person tells a story on a particular theme, it is often followed by another on the same theme. Conversational narratives not only have a prototypical structure identified by Labov and Waletzky (1967), but, as Eggins and Slade (1997) suggest, belong to various sub-genres, including plain 'recounts' of events; 'exemplum' narratives used to validate arguments; and personal 'anecdotes', whose point may be to amuse rather than reach a serious conclusion. Lucantonio (2002) has already proposed that these may be suitable models for teaching Japanese learners.

Some principles for developing narrative tasks

Based on the above observations, some tentative principles were proposed for making more authentic tasks for low level learners. It was also hoped that these principles would encourage the development of narrative tasks with a social dimension, bringing them closer to storytelling outside the classroom. These principles were as follows:

- Allow preparation time: In order to have learners tell personal stories preparation time is needed. Learners should write down their story and tell it from memory.

- Provide a theme. The teacher must give learners a theme upon which to focus their stories.
- Involve the listener. The listener should be given a role to ensure that they actively listen. This can be done by having them write down, or better still, repeat to another learner, the story they heard.
- Encourage intimacy. Having learners work with familiar partners and omitting the "reporting back" stage of the task-based cycle (Willis, 1996) may afford learners more conversational intimacy.
- Provide interesting stories. If source stories are used, they should be carefully selected for comprehension and interest to the learners.
- Tell teacher stories. Just as one story can give rise to another in conversation, the teacher's tales can be a way to unlock learners' experiences. Teacher's stories may also be a form of social communication within the classroom itself (Wajnryb, 2003).

How these principles are adapted to develop and use narrative tasks in the classroom will depend on the teaching context.

Personalised narrative tasks in the classroom

To shed some light on the use of these principles in the author's own teaching situation, some retelling tasks of the kind used in popular communicative texts were prepared, together with some more personalised open tasks. It was hoped that learners who used the more open tasks would learn to treat narrative tasks as opportunities for real communication, and that this experience would be reflected in their performance on a final task, which was to tell a prepared personal story to a partner.

Subjects

The subjects were four classes of engineering majors taking general English courses as a compulsory language requirement (Table 1). Two classes were upper level first year classes and two were more mixed level second year classes.

Table 1. The four classes and the distribution of tasks

Group A (30)*	First year (retelling tasks)
Group B (30)*	First year (personalised tasks)
Group C (27)*	Second year (conversation strategies + retelling tasks)
Group D (25)*	Second year (conversation strategies + personalised tasks)

* Figures in parenthesis indicate student numbers.

As these were not experimental classes, another difference between the first and second year classes was the course content. Whereas the first year class was listening based, the second year classes were focused on developing fluency through conversation strategies and using timed conversations. Learners were taught phrases such as *that sounds + adj.,* or *like what?* to help them manage conversational interaction in English. They had regular four-minute conversations with nearby students on simple topics, like sports or school, and were encouraged afterwards to reflect on the language they had used. This approach derives from Kenny and Woo (2000), the textbook for these classes. The techniques used for promoting fluency to support personal expression in this text appeared to

be compatible with the approach to developing narrative skills proposed here. It was therefore predicted that group D would produce the best storytellers, followed by group B.

Tasks

Table 2 summarises the preparation tasks used.

Table 2. A summary of the narrative tasks used in this project.

Retelling narrative tasks	*Personalised narrative tasks*
Mini written stories (100 words)	Finish the fairy story (Shrek opening)
Picture stories (10 caption picture story)	Recount weekend activities.
Comparing stories (spot the difference)	Telling the funny bits (A & B report on episodes of *Mr. Bean*)
Retelling from video (watched by all students)	Talking about a favourite book or movie.

The retelling tasks consisted of four different textbook style tasks based on different original mediums--written, pictures, and video.

Following the principles outlined above, the personalised tasks allowed more opportunity for personal expression, but provided support by offering an initial model, time for writing, and the intimacy of working with familiar partners. They required more work by learners, but the opportunities for creativity meant more involvement, and sometimes more fun. The Mr.

Bean activity caused great hilarity, and learners worked hard to describe episodes to their partner who had not seen it. Due to space constraints, the remainder of this paper will focus on the final task given to all learners.

Telling a personal story

The final task was to tell a personal story to one or two partners. Learners wrote a personal story of over 150 words. This was submitted for marking, and returned with comments and advice. Learners were then told they would have to tell the story as part of a final speaking test, which was audio recorded on tape, and later transcribed. The story titles were as follows:

A day I will never forget
A frightening experience
A time I got really angry
An embarrassing moment
A strange dream
My life story in a nutshell

The titles were taken from a storytelling game on the Japanese chat-show *Gokigenyo,* but chosen because they provided a thematic focus which embraces a variety of common experiences of the kind found in the literature on conversational narrative.

Observations and discussion

It was hoped that the final task might encourage learners to produce something closer to a conversational narrative within a classroom context, especially by those who had used the personalised tasks (groups B and D). Here is a story told by one of the first year students in group B who had used the personalised narrative tasks.

The story is about handball. In high school, I belong to the handball club, and the day I never forget is December 12 of the year 2000. I have a, I have a game on that day. I hurt my knee, when I shot the shot. And I couldn't play handball for a while, but I couldn't retire because I love handball very much. Now I play handball in TDU.

Her story is told smoothly in about 60 seconds. However despite the dramatic topic there is no sense of drama in the way she tells it. This kind of telling proved to be typical of the stories told by first year students, irrespective of the task type they had used. This was a disappointing result which could, however, be accounted for by the pressure of performing in a test, and being recorded. Learners quite naturally treated this as an English task, and not a social activity.

However under these same circumstances, many of the second year conversational narratives were quite different from this. Those in class D, in which the personalised tasks were used, tended to be more successful.

This is the story (listeners laugh) When I was junior high school student. I waited for my friend, to play with me, in front of Hachiko in Shibuya. She didn't come at time. I waited there. Then a boy came from the station, and he waved his hand to me (listeners laugh) he was my classmate of elementary school. But we didn't er, we weren't um [sound of frustration trying to find the right word] we didn't get along, each other, but I was wave my hand. Suddenly a girl found out from my back. So he wave his hand to her.

(listeners laugh) I was so ashamed // ("embarrass")
embarrassed, embarrassment. So I I hate my friend
(all laugh).

Although this narrative was recorded during a test, we can see
here that these learners are really communicating, in the sense
that this learner is telling a personal story to her friends, and
her listeners respond naturally by laughing at the amusing parts
(though they also laugh nervously at the beginning). One of the
listeners even helps her find the key word "embarrass" which
shows she saw the main point of the story. Perhaps one of the
reasons these learners were more successful is that they were
used to doing activities in class which, while framed from a
pedagogic point of view as "fluency building exercises", also
became opportunities for social communication. The following
extract from these same learners during a timed conversation
illustrates the kind of interaction that they were used to having.

[first part omitted]
Hokkaido night view is very beautiful so I want to go.
(laughs)
With, er who?
With my boyfriend. (all laugh)
Oh, sounds good (all laugh)
That looks very romantic.
I hope so. Oh (all laugh again)
Have you ever been to um, travel, with your boyfriend?
(all laugh)
Never.
Never?
My parents are very strict…and he never permit me
Ahh
[continues]

The topic of *travel* is discussed in a way which reflects shared
interests, such as boyfriends and parental control. The target
conversational discourse features such as *I hope so*, *sounds
good*, and *with who?* not only aid fluency, but also allow a more
authentic form of social communication to develop. It is easy
to see how this is an effective preparation for the telling of a
personal story. At the same time the personal narrative pushes the
learners much further, both in terms of producing an extended
chunk of discourse, and by sharing a personal experience, in
terms of social communication with their classmates.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed a classroom research project which
sought to compare the effects of retelling narrative tasks with
more personalised ones, inspired by a review of the literature
on conversational narrative. The study itself has many
limitations which need to be addressed by more carefully
organised and detailed research. Nevertheless the observations
made here, together with the analysis of the literature review,
indicate a possible direction for the development of more
authentic narrative tasks. For example, it appears that building
L2 relationships through fluency activities may be a useful
preparation for telling personal stories. Even the brief summary
of features of conversational narratives provided above indicates
that there are a variety of skills involved in conversational
narrative worthy of pedagogic exploration. This may be done
through consciousness-raising, but also by exploring strategic
ways to elicit conversational narratives in the classroom. In this
way, rather than being artificial activities acting as cognitive
treadmills, narrative tasks may become an effective way to
prepare learners for telling stories in conversation, and through
that, establishing their identity in the target language.

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