

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

An approach to conversational storytelling in the classroom

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Reference data:

Coulson, D. & Jones, B. (2009). An approach to conversational storytelling in the classroom. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The conversational exchange of everyday happenings is a fundamental component of social interaction. When people start chatting informally, they are likely to engage in recounting happenings such as recent memorable occurrences, or relate things about third parties. One story will often lead to another as listeners recall their own related events, resulting in a self-sustaining interaction. In this paper, we will discuss an approach to the teaching of conversational storytelling for Japanese EFL learners based on this aspect of communication in English. We will briefly describe the background research in this field of linguistic enquiry. Next, we will describe the generic structure of conversational anecdotes, and then examine how this can be applied to the teaching of a conversational storytelling course in Japan at the pre-intermediate level. Finally, we will show the results of an investigation into students' self-evaluation of their ability and the evaluation of their ability by native speaker interlocutors in an on-campus communication festival called English Day.

日常に起きたことをやりとりするのは対話の根本的な柱となっている。気の置けない会話では最近起きた出来事、あるいは知り合いの人にあったことをやりとりする確立が高いと推定される。話を聞いている相手も似た出来事を思い出したり、それについて返答したりで会話が継続していく。この論文では、日本人の英語学習者の為、このような対話におけるストーリーテリングの教授法を紹介する。言語学の背景研究を短くまとめ、英会話におけるストーリーテリングの構成が取り上げられている。その後、準中級レベルのコースの為に、この教育法の導入方法の手順を検討する。最後に、大学1年生の学生を対象にどのような成果を上げられたのかを論じる。

Thinking back to her childhood, the American anthropologist Elinor Ochs recalls the important social role that the neighborhood drugstore played in her local community. It was not merely a place of commerce but also served as a venue where her father and other townfolk would gather



to talk about local politics and events. This talk would often take the form of personal narrative as they told each other “what they knew, what they believed, what they felt and what they wished to be happening” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 1). Similarly, when Australian linguists, Suzanne Eggins and Diana Slade, recorded and analyzed the coffee-break conversations of factory employees, they were struck by the high proportion of anecdotes and personal narratives that came up (Eggins & Slade, 1997). On reflection, it becomes obvious that short anecdotes account for a significant proportion of our conversation. Certainly, the authors of the present study can recall many occasions when they have sat with family and friends and spontaneous exchanges of stories have occurred.

Ochs and Capps note that “Personal narrative is ubiquitous. Whether in a store, along the road, at work, play, home or other community settings, when people are together, they are inclined to talk about events—those they have read about, those they have experienced directly, and those they imagine” (ibid). Andrew Wright has expressed something similar: “Go to any pub or party and you will hear a constant babble of stories. The whole world is full of storytellers” (Wright, 1995, p.16).

The fact that storytelling occurs so frequently in conversation is one good reason why teachers might be recommended to devote a portion of their teaching time to helping students acquire the necessary skills. Another reason concerns the social advantages that can be gained by those acquiring a reasonable level of competence in this conversational skill. As we shall see later, listeners will often show their appreciation of a story well told and may even

add to it with a similar story of their own, thus allowing the storyteller to become a valuable link in a chain of related stories. Finally and, we believe most importantly, it can give students the satisfaction of using their target language to say something true and meaningful about themselves.

The challenge of telling a story fluently in English

Although it may seem quite natural for us to include stories from our own experience in our daily communication, telling a story may make considerable grammatical and lexical demands on the student because of certain generic and linguistic features which characterize this form of interaction. If foreign language students are not explicitly trained in these features, their language production may encounter quite serious difficulties. The following is a real example of one intermediate-level student, who had trouble telling a spontaneous story to her teacher, while walking along the street to college.

01 T: Can you drive?

02 S: I can't take a license by this month.

03 T: How come?

04 S: 2 years ago, I rode a bicycle. But came car and *smash*.
I was *brain injury*.

05 T: That's absolutely terrible.

06 S: I *was turning left* and I think car don't don't came but
it came.

07 T: Was... the driver bad?

T=Teacher; S= Student (*words in italics were spoken in Japanese*)

Where a native speaker would naturally use the past continuous form, “I was riding my bicycle...” the student says, “I rode a bicycle” at line 04. In her next utterance (also line 04) she falters and resorts to Japanese. In line 06, a similar problem occurs with tense selection, but this time rather than struggling with formulating the appropriate English form, she immediately uses Japanese to express “was turning left”. We see that the rest of the turn in line 06 is also marked with serious errors and further lapses into Japanese.

Although this student tried hard to convey her unfortunate story of being injured in a traffic accident her lack of explicit knowledge of how to tell a conversational story led to quite a serious breakdown in her language which went unrepaired. Although it might be argued that the interaction was successful since the teacher finally asked a relevant question, it is important to deal pedagogically with such trouble. First, awareness of the language forms commonly used in conversational storytelling can be easily raised, since the grammar involved is not very complex. This will be discussed further below. Second, being able to tell a story which is coherent, effective and entertaining has obvious social benefits for students aiming to converse in an English speaking environment.

The second point mentioned above gives rise to a third point which we feel deserves attention. The teacher, who is a native speaker and one of the authors of this paper, responds to the student’s story with the question, “Was... the driver bad?” He explains he would normally have asked, “Was it the driver’s fault?” However, out of concern for the student’s ease of comprehension, he chose a non-standard form. This

raises an important issue. If learners do not achieve a certain minimum level of accurate and fluent production, it is likely that in conversation with native or higher level speakers, they will be responded to with unnatural utterances. If so, this may impair their linguistic development as they will constantly miss out on exposure to and, consequently, opportunities for the acquisition of natural usage. To this extent, the impression that learners make on higher level speakers can be an important part of their language learning endeavors. Below, we will introduce the results of an investigation into the impression native speakers had of students who had studied and practiced conversational storytelling in two on-campus English Day events in which they had a chance to talk to each other.

In sum, the challenge for teachers is how to provide the scaffolding and training so that our students will be able to tell stories about themselves that are reasonably accurate, fluent and, moreover, engaging. Before that, in the following sections, we will discuss further the generic features of conversational storytelling. We will also describe how we present a manageable amount of useful language which can be maximized by learners in conversation. Finally, we will describe a powerful classroom technique for giving learners practice in oral fluency, which can alleviate some of the problems encountered by the student in the exchange above.

Generic features of conversational storytelling

We have found the pattern introduced by Eggins and Slade (1997) to describe the generic structure of conversational anecdotes an extremely valuable starting point. Based on a model originally proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967)

and referred to by McCarthy (1991), Eggins and Slade have described five stages around which conversational anecdotes are structured. These are:

1. *Abstract*, a short phrase from the teller which serves as an announcement that a story is about to be told. It will often give the listener(s) an indication of the type of story they are about to hear as in *something funny happened the other day*.
2. *Orientation*, essential background information to introduce the story participants and locate it in time and space. We could express this as the *who, where, when* and *under what circumstances* section of the story.
3. *Remarkable event*, the central happening around which the story is based.
4. *Reaction*. This section invites the audience to share and understand the reaction of the teller or story participants to the event. It will often include expressions of amusement, surprise, anger or other emotions.
5. *Coda*. This can be used to round off a story by building “a bridge between the storyworld and the moment of telling” (McCarthy 1991, p. 138). The example that McCarthy gives is “and ever since, I’ve never been able to look at a mango without feeling sick” (ibid).

Eggins and Slade note that the *abstract* and *coda* are optional, but that one can expect to find *orientation*, *remarkable event* and *reaction* in most conversational anecdotes. For this reason, we have chosen to emphasize

these three components when presenting conversational storytelling to our students. The three components can be seen operating in the following anecdote, which we have concocted as a simple introduction to the topic of conversational storytelling:

Orientation

The other week I was walking through the park and it was a really beautiful day. You know, the sun was shining, the birds were singing...

Remarkable Event

And, suddenly, I saw a snake on the path in front of me.

Reaction

Well, I just froze. I didn’t know what to do. But just then an eagle swooped down, picked up the snake, and carried it away. Oh, I was so relieved.

Although this is a fictional story our students have usually found it amusing, especially if accompanied by some exaggerated gestures and a couple of toy animals. We have then followed this by giving students some controlled practice in using past continuous / past simple by “What do you think comes next?” activities such as finishing the sentence in: I was riding my bike down the street and, all of a sudden...

After this we invite students to tell their own stories. Sometimes this has been met with reluctance as it appears too difficult. However, we have often found that an interesting phenomenon occurs when we write Eggins and Slade’s three main components on the board in the following way:

Orientation: who where when?

Remarkable event: what happened?

Reaction: how did you feel?

We have often observed that the notions of who, where, when? / what happened? / how did you feel? are easily accessible to the students and they are able to produce the essential elements of the story with some degree of fluency. It is as if the presentation of the generic form serves as an organizing template facilitating the production of language. Moreover, grammatical errors on such common features as, “I was walking in the park...” noticeably reduce. As we saw above with the traffic accident account, students usually have trouble in spontaneously producing such forms. It would seem that the understanding of macro-level organization of discourse beyond grammar helps to free up learners’ attentional resources.

More about reaction

In teaching the Eggins and Slade model and giving students practice in storytelling, we felt that the reaction stage was worthy of special attention. An important aspect of personal stories is describing the emotions felt during, or after, the remarkable event. Here, teaching students about the variety of expressive adjectives in English can add a lot of color to their stories. Instead of standard adjectives like *happy* and *sad*, more vivid, extreme adjectives such as *delighted* and *devastated* can be introduced. Modifying adverbs can also be introduced. *Very happy* can be more strongly expressed as *absolutely delighted*. Such resources give learners the chance to “appeal” to native speaker interlocutors in a much

livelier fashion than the more usual repetition of *happy*. One social benefit that accrues from such deliberate usage is that learners may meet with positive reactions such as laughter and follow-up questions for using such language, and this in turn boosts their motivation. We have supplied a list of useful adjectives which can have a significant effect on learners’ English (Appendix 1). We also recommend teaching a small number of idiomatic phrases such as “I burst into tears”, “and then just to make matters worse”, and “Oh, it was such a relief.”

Conversational storytelling naturally involves more than one teller. Listeners will often react to the story with continuers such as “mmhm” or “uh huh,” assessments such as “How awful” or “wonderful,” or clarification requests such as “but why did he do that?” (Eggins & Slade, 1997; Ochs & Capps, 2001). As students became more efficient at telling their stories, we encouraged them to listen and react to their partner’s stories and taught them specific lexis in order to be able to do so. This involved using drills such as the following to give practice with the common “I bet” + subject + auxiliary verb structure:

I was tired after that walk – I bet you were!

I didn’t want to go out again – I bet you didn’t!

It was a great experience, though – I bet it was!

and the teaching of sentence stems such as: “That sounds...., I bet that was...., That must have been....”.

We also noted that stories often occur in clusters. One story will often spark off another story, or a series of stories, on a similar or related topic (Ryave 1978), a phenomenon which is referred to as a “story round” (Tannen 1984).

Therefore, we also taught a number of story connectors such as: “Something similar happened to me,” “Talking about pets...” and “Yeah, I remember when I...”

Teaching a conversational storytelling course in a Japanese college

We have found that teaching students how to describe their favorite movies is an ideal way to start teaching them about the structure of conversational stories. Most movies can be described using the standard generic pattern described by Eggins and Slade. High frequency phrases for orientation include: “It is set in..., It takes place in..., It’s about a person who...” We have given an example from a well-known adventure movie *Home Alone* (Appendix 2).

Using this template, students can easily make descriptions of their own favorite movies. These are very enjoyable to share and form the basis of various pair-work activities, one of which we will describe later. The more important point is that this training can lay the foundation for the recounting of personal happenings as well. In subsequent lessons of our syllabus, we ask students to prepare their personal stories, or those of people they know, using the generic pattern. Before class, they write stories on topics such as personal success stories, small accidents, disappointments, unlucky days, stories from their childhood and so on.

In addition to well-structured, expressive stories, fluency is a key aspect of successfully telling a personal anecdote. We have found that applying time pressure in pair-work is very effective in helping learners to tell their stories more naturally. A technique which we have found useful is

“4—3—2” (Nation, 2001). In this exercise, student pairs are asked to tell their stories to each other in decreasing time spans. After being given a specific time, such as 4 minutes, to complete the task, they make a new pair and try to relate the same content in 3 minutes. They then make a third and final pair, and attempt to tell the content in half the original time. This time frame of 4—3—2 minutes can be varied in length to match students’ abilities, with the general advice that the third round should be half the time of the first. For our first-year students, we find that 90 seconds—60 seconds—45 seconds works well. Although almost any group size can work, we have found that arranging students in groups of six is particularly helpful. This activity usually results in a great deal of excitement, and a determination to finish their stories in the time set.

At a later stage in the course, we adapt this fluency activity to focus on active listening and mutual sharing. Learners now exchange stories on similar topics with appropriate reactions, such as “I bet that was amazing” and connect their stories with phrases such as “something similar happened to me”. In this instance, the timed practice is not one-way, but rather the two partners attempt to complete their conversations in the time available. Naturally, we lengthened the time frame. In this way, a very natural form of interaction is achieved in the classroom, and it is very noticeable that all students remain firmly on task, maintaining English all the way through the activity.

Experiment

The experiment described below centered on the performance of first-year university students (mainly 18-

years old), and guests' evaluation of them, during two on-campus communication festivals called English Day, hereafter "ED". The guests included native and non-native speakers of English from various countries, and they were mainly in their 20s. The native speakers were mostly language teachers and the non-native speakers were graduate students. Eight of these 16 guests participated in both events, but spoke to different students each time. The two ED events were held five months apart. One event was held before instruction in conversational storytelling and one was held after. In both cases, the structure of the day was similar. In the morning session, there were themed discussions with English-speaking guests in which groups of three students would try to take the initiative in conversation by talking about their experiences of travel in Japan. This was thought to be a suitable topic as many of the guests had not had a chance to visit Japan extensively. In the first ED, students received no specific instruction in how to tell their travel stories. However, for the second ED, students were advised to prepare and tell a conversational story about one memorable happening during their travels, using the generic pattern they had been taught. By this stage, students had received around eight lessons of instruction focusing on this skill.

In the afternoon sessions of both ED events, there were "free conversation" sessions. Students were given no explicit instructions on how to conduct these interactions. In all instances, conversations with guests were usually carried out in groups of three students to one guest which lasted about 30 minutes.

To assess the impressions made on native speakers, we devised a pair of simple questionnaires. These were dispensed during and after both ED events. One questionnaire (Appendix 3) was given to the guests who answered the questions immediately after the sessions with students in ED. This only comprised four questions, as it had to be completed in a very short amount of time. Its aim was to assess the guests' impressions of how well the students had conversed with them. The other questionnaire (Appendix 4) was given to learners before the first ED and after the second ED. The questionnaire was based on that of Yashima (2002). It included 12 questions which aimed to assess various aspects of their willingness to communicate in English. These questions were: orientation to non-Japanese (questions 1—4), motivation to use English (questions 5—8), and attitudes to using English for communication (questions 9—12). Both questionnaires used a 6-point scale, with 6 points as the maximum score.

Results

The results from the first questionnaire revealed an important difference from the first to the second ED event. The mean evaluation of guests in the afternoon sessions in both events was exactly the same. This indicates the students made no better impression on their guests in free conversation across the two events. However, in the morning sessions (in which students made use of a conversational storytelling approach talking about their travel experiences), there was a significant change ($t=4.54$, $p<0.0001$) from the first ED to the second ED in guests' views of students' abilities. The changes in guests' evaluations were tallied and the degree

of change across the intervening five months was found by subtracting the latter from the former. As shown in the graph in Appendix 5, the answers to all four questions on the second ED revealed a higher assessment than on the first ED. The most notable change was in the guests' impression of the students' general ability (question 3). The rating for student enthusiasm (question 1) was also significantly higher while the increase for questions 2 and 4 was less marked.

As for students' self-evaluations, only two of the 12 questions produced a significant change. These were question 6 [I wouldn't mind helping a foreigner having trouble in a station or restaurant] $t=2.33$ $p<0.01$, and question 11 [I think I am able to make foreigners laugh using English] $t=1.5$, $p<0.05$. The overall results are shown in appendix 6.

Discussion

To investigate the quality of students' speech, recordings were made during the second ED. There was a marked difference between the quality of student interaction in the morning and afternoon sessions. In the 30-minute afternoon sessions, in which the students had not been instructed to use their storytelling skills, interaction tended to follow a superficial question-answer format. For example, one group asked their guest, "Can you cook?" to which he replied, "I can make scones. Not many people can make scones..." This invited a related follow-up question or related comment. However, his response was immediately followed by a new question, "What is the most popular food in Canada?" Although it could be argued that this response was not completely irrelevant to the topic, we felt that the students had missed an opportunity to make use of a more relevant

follow-up comment or question such as "I love scones" or "Where did you learn?" Indeed, our general impression of students' English over the 30-minute sessions is that they were not listening carefully to what their interlocutors were saying, did not confirm meanings, and specifically never extended the topic in hand to relevant personal stories.

However, there was some cause for optimism in that the evaluations of the guests were surprisingly high during this session. The average score given by the 16 guests was 5.05 out of a maximum 6 (as it was during the first ED too). One possible reason for this high evaluation is that the expectations of the guests, many of whom are Assistant Language Teachers, of our students' abilities were surpassed by their cheerful interaction.

The recordings made in the morning were far more gratifying. When students related their specific memories of travel experiences, there was a sudden shift in the balance from the superficial question-answer format as students and guests engaged in a richer form of interaction. One example is transcribed below:

Student: I will tell you an unlucky story about a concert in Yokohama. It was sunny in the morning, but when the concert started, it started to rain. About 20 minutes later, I was soaked. The concert stage was dry. (general laughter). So it rained only for the concert goers.

Guest: Did you catch a cold?

Student: A little.

Guest: Oh no (exaggerated).

In this exchange, the student holds the floor and her story results in an empathetic comment from the guest, rounding off a completely coherent exchange. Although the whole exchange is only around 55 words, it is very successful in that it is comparatively much longer than the comments and questions that were usually uttered in the ED sessions. In educational terms, we feel this difference is very important. A good strategy for students is to get into the habit of mental rehearsal of topics they want to talk about. Without a solid grounding in the generic pattern, however, students may lack the necessary template to prepare such topics. Additionally, we have found that sheltered communicative environments such as ED are essential for Japanese students, whose L1 is so different from English, so that they can begin to speak on a more equal basis with native English speakers. These environments allow the students, under instruction, to experiment in interacting with their interlocutors to use English in a truly meaningful way, rather than a more superficial form of communication, however cheerful it may be.

One outstanding question concerns why the students didn't use the conversational storytelling technique in the afternoon sessions of ED2, having done this so successfully in the morning. It is axiomatic that language acquisition is a slow process and what students are taught may not automatically appear in their *spontaneous* production (DeKeyser 2002). Part of this may be an issue of personal confidence. Despite the significant change in the guests' view of the students' abilities between the ED morning sessions, the more extensive questionnaire students filled out about their performance revealed much less impressive changes

(see Appendix 6). This suggests that the benefits from beginning to converse in a more sophisticated and balanced manner with native, or other proficient, speakers are not immediate. Nevertheless, when the students were specifically encouraged to tell their travel stories in the morning sessions, they were generally able to weave these stories into the conversation. This is indicative of the potential of teaching a syllabus such as the one described in this paper. Teachers should be aware, however, that it does take time before students are fully able to automatize these skills, and become confident in using them, in free conversation.

Conclusion

We have found that the teaching of conversational storytelling, though an ambitious undertaking, can result in a significant improvement in students' quality of spoken production. Instruction in this specific genre of English speech resulted in a significant change in the impression that students made on native English speakers. At face value, this is a very good result because direct intervention in classroom instruction led to a significant change in the impression that students made on their conversation partners. Since the exchange of everyday occurrences is such an important staple of discourse, it is essential for students to be given scaffolded practice in this specific skill. Through the judicious sequencing of syllabus objectives, and useful, highly-recyclable language, it is possible for students to engage in precedent-setting conversation, particularly in sheltered environments, such as cross-cultural festivals. We fully recommend all second language educators to consider this approach for their students.

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Bob Jones runs his own small school in Gifu Prefecture, the REJ English House, and also teaches part-time at Sugiyama Jogakuen University. He is interested in applications of conversation analysis to the classroom, and lexical approaches to teaching.

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Appendix 1

Standard and extreme adjective pairs

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| very / really tired | absolutely / just / really exhausted |
| surprising | amazing |
| interesting | fascinating |
| angry | furios |
| funny | hilarious |
| scared | terrified |
| shocked | devastated |
| hungry | starving |

Appendix 2

Generic pattern, and accompanying sample phrases for a well-known movie

| | | |
|------------------|---|---|
| Orientation | Who Where When | This is about a boy who lives in America in the 1980s. |
| Remarkable Event | What happens | His parents leave him alone in the house at Christmas. Thieves enter the house. |
| Reaction | How does it end? How does the actor feel? | The boy fights with the thieves and win. He is not scared but he is delighted when his family comes home. |

Appendix 3

Questions guests answered to evaluate students' abilities.

All questions were answerable with the following scale:

No 1-2-3-4-5-6 Yes

1. Did you find the students enthusiastic in talking to you?
2. Did they respond well to your questions?
3. What is your impression of students' general ability?
4. Did you find the interaction between you and the students balanced?

Appendix 4

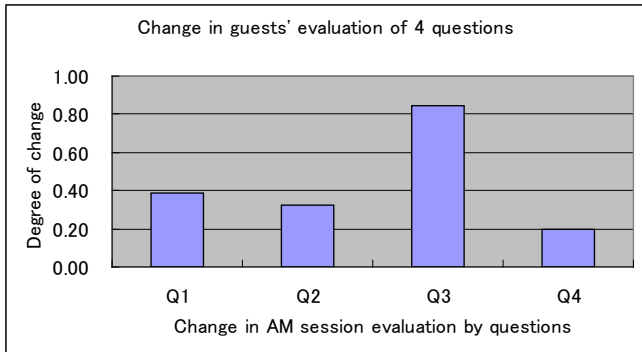
Questions students answered about their English ability (original written in Japanese.)

All questions were answerable with the following scale:

No 1-2-3-4-5-6 Yes

1. I would like to talk to overseas students if they came to our college.
2. I usually avoid talking with foreigners.
3. I would be a little nervous if foreigners moved in next door.
4. I want to make friends with overseas students studying in Japan.
5. I don't have much confidence in talking with foreigners in English.
6. I wouldn't mind helping a foreign having trouble in a station or restaurant.
7. I wouldn't like to study overseas for long since I would have trouble with English.
8. Rather than actively talking, I listen and chime in with phrases when I talk with foreigners.
9. I think foreigners can understand my English pronunciation.
10. I know the necessary phrases and words to enjoy simple English conversation.
11. I think I am able to make foreigners laugh using English.
12. I think I can express my meaning even if I make English grammar mistakes.

Appendix 5



Appendix 6

