

# Narrative Frames as a Course Evaluation Instrument

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Although getting student feedback on courses via questionnaires has been practiced for a long time, empirical studies on the topic are not substantial enough, nor are alternatives adequately considered. This study introduces and evaluates an alternative qualitative instrument known as narrative frames, which uses prompts to stimulate written feedback. In order to investigate its feasibility, I collected data from 26 Japanese university students in an English Teaching Methods course. Findings suggest that these narrative frames served as a useful tool for eliciting the students' experiences in the course, their impressions of it, and its impact on them. These findings led me, as the instructor of the course, to be able to critically reflect on its content. Pedagogical and research implications for the future use of narrative frames are provided.

学生による授業評価アンケートは教育改善のために必要な手段として長年定着しているが、それらに関する研究、またそれに取って代わる手段の議論は不十分である。本論では、質的研究手法の1つで、書き手の文章作成を助長するとされているナラティブフレーム（物語枠組み）を授業評価の手段として用い、その評価を行った。データは英語科教育法を受講した26人の大学生から収集した。結果、ナラティブフレームは授業評価手段としての機能を十分に果たし、学生の授業への印象や彼らが授業から受けた影響の詳細を明らかにできることが分かった。また、これらの結果内容は担当教員が授業を批判的に精査し、振り返り活動を行うことに役立った。本論では最後に、ナラティブフレームの使用、研究に関する提言を行う。

The practice of obtaining student feedback at the end of the semester on classes for assessing teaching quality is now well established and carried out in higher education throughout the world, including in Japan (Freeman & Dobbins, 2013; Mori & Tanabe, 2011). Millions of university students are asked to rate their level of satisfaction regarding their teachers and courses by completing questionnaires, often consisting of Likert-scales and open-ended questions. Student feedback is believed to provide an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the course, which can then be used by the instructor to improve its quality and delivery, and by the institution as proof of teaching effectiveness for both internal and external stakeholders (Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002). Although there have been several positive findings on the use of standard quantitative questionnaires made by university administrators, critics doubt whether they can reflect the complexity of human experience or be reliable in their assessment of modern forms of teaching (e.g.,

student-centered lessons) (Braga, Paccagnella, & Pellizzari, 2014; Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002). As such, this study offers an alternative instrument for course evaluation, known as narrative frames. They differ from formal questionnaires in that they are neither quantitative nor completely open-ended, and include contextualized prompts. This study is significant for two reasons. First, it introduces and evaluates narrative frames for course evaluations and, second, it presents empirical research on the topic of student feedback on teaching, which has been surprisingly understudied in the field of ELT.

## Narrative Frames

Narrative inquiry has become a vital tool for academic research on language teaching and learning. One of its research instruments is narrative frames. These are sets of written story templates, consisting of sentence starters followed by blank spaces and conjunctions, that prompt participants to write down their ideas in a narrative form (Barkhuizen, 2014).

Since the development of narrative frames by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008), numerous researchers have used them in a variety of ways to investigate a range of topics in different contexts. Barkhuizen (2014) reviewed these and reported that narrative frames had been used to explore the experiences of language teachers in China (Barkhuizen, 2009; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009; Xu, 2014), in Vietnam (Barnard & Nguyen, 2010), and in the UK and Australia (Shelly, Murphy, & White, 2013). They have also been used with language learner (Hiratsuka, 2014; Swenson & Visgatis, 2011), and trainee seamen in Kiribati (Macalister, 2012). More recently, Hiratsuka (2016) made use of the instrument for a needs analysis in his Media English course at a Japanese university. The narrative frames collected from 20 Japanese students made him aware of the students' expectations of him and the course, as well as their intentions during the course. In South Korea, Moodie's (2016) research investigated how the prior language learning experiences of language teachers impacted their current teaching beliefs and practices. The narrative frames gathered from 18 South Korean language teachers revealed the in-

fluence of prior language learning on their teaching as either having no impact or compelling them to be determined to differ from their own language teachers. Mehrani (2017) included narrative frames in his study with Iranian teachers. The narrative frames facilitated his ability to identify pedagogical concerns of 68 teacher-participants and detect the challenges and opportunities they encountered while conducting action research.

As seen here, many studies have employed narrative frames. However, no study has examined their use as a course evaluation instrument. To fill the gap in the literature, this study deals with the findings of the following question: What is the effectiveness of narrative frames as a course evaluation instrument in an English Teaching Methods course at a Japanese university?

## Methodology

The context was an English Teaching Methods course at a national university in southern Japan. The course was taught by me and was a prerequisite for receiving an English teaching license for secondary schools. The purpose of the course was to enable the students to learn about different English teaching methods through analyzing class activities and evaluating the effects of them on Japanese learners of English. A total of 28 second and third-year university students took the course. At the end of the course, I invited students to complete narrative frames anonymously, emphasizing that their participation and written content would not affect their grades. Twenty-six students volunteered to participate and composed narrative frames within one hour. The frames were designed by me based on the literature of previous studies. My aim was to design an instrument that could elicit the students' feelings and thoughts about the course as well as possible differences between the course and other courses (see Appendix). I decided to ask the students to complete two frames (one in English and the other in Japanese) although the contents were the same. I did this for two reasons. First, I expected that writing in English would give them a meaningful opportunity to use English and thus serve as a nice way to conclude the course. Second, I anticipated that the students would feel less threatened writing in Japanese when engaging in an unfamiliar task (see Hiratsuka, 2014). Understandably, the students wrote richer descriptions in their Japanese frames than they did in English; therefore, the Japanese data were the focus of this study.

In analyzing the data, I first translated from Japanese to English while making every effort to

maintain the original meaning of the participants' responses. I then read each of the narrative frames in completion and, during my second reading, took analytic memos. Afterward, I uploaded the data into the qualitative analysis software, NVivo 11, which sorted each of the 24 response spaces (see Appendix). In order to find convergences and divergences between the participants, I conducted a qualitative content analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). From this iterative analytic procedure, two interrelated categories emerged. They were (a) students' impressions of the course, and (b) impacts of the course on students.

## Findings

### *Students' Impressions of the Course*

Table 1. *Students' Impressions of the Course* (n = 26)

Themes	Details of themes	Frequency
Employing unique teaching styles	Conversation opportunities	7
	Student-centered	6
	Flexible	4
	English as a medium of instruction (EMI)	4
	Total	(21)
Getting access to personal stories	Stories told by the teacher	10
	Stories told by the classmates	3
	Total	(13)
Providing knowledge	English teaching methods	6
	English	5
	Total	(11)
Lacking explanations about theories	Theories described in the textbook	6
	Total	(6)
Lacking the connection between theories and practices	Disconnection between theories and practices	3
	Total	(3)

*Note.* Any one response could contain more than one detail, so the total of frequencies do not add up to 26.

As indicated in Table 1, the most common response was to the unique teaching styles that were introduced in the course (21 references). Some stu-

dents noted that the course brought about “plenty of conversation and discussion opportunities,” and therefore the students felt that they “could fully communicate with all the people in the room” (seven references). Similarly, the course was reported by six students to be student-centered, as one wrote: “The focus of the course was on the autonomy of the students.” Another affirmed by saying: “In comparison to other courses, the style of the course was different because it was not the teacher who explained and provided opinions about the textbook but it was us, the students.” Flexibility received four mentions as one essential characteristic of the course. For instance, one student said: “My teacher was flexible. Depending on the students’ responses and behaviors in class, the course changed its paths several times.” Those who were used to taking lessons where teachers rigidly followed the lesson plans and textbook were pleasantly surprised: “The course did not feel like a ‘class.’ It was inspirational because we were given freedom and independence.” Four students remarked that the English was used as the only medium of instruction. One student commented: “The course was organized in a way that encouraged us to listen to others and participate in activities by only using English. I felt like ‘I am learning!’” Another recollected: “The teacher successfully created an active English-only atmosphere in the classes.”

Students made 13 references to personal stories told during the course (10 referred to teacher stories and three to classmate stories). Typical responses included: “The course was filled with the personal experiences of the teacher as a former high school English teacher and when he went to Canada” and “The comments made by the classmates were interesting. At first sight, what they were saying seemed to be the same, but each one of them had different reasons for and particular stories behind their ideas.” It was clear that the personal stories told by both the teacher and classmates, be they about language teaching/learning or a study abroad experience, played an important role in getting the students to become enlightened and relate to the teacher and other classmates in a meaningful way. This suggests that stories may be an effective pedagogical strategy in the classroom. Considering that the aims of the course were to enable the students to acquire a basic understanding of English language teaching methods and to engage successfully in discussions in English, it was encouraging to see that several participants felt that they had achieved these aims (11 references). Despite these positive comments, some noted that the course lacked adequate explanations on educational theories (six ref-

erences), or thought that it was disconnected from teaching practices at schools (three references).

### Impacts of the Course on Students

Table 2. *Impacts of the Course on Students (n = 26)*

Themes	Details of themes	Frequency
Motivating the students	Use English more	8
	Study English harder	7
	Hold opinions and thoughts in English more	3
	Learn more about English teaching methods	3
	Become better at teaching English	3
	Total	(24)
Bringing people together	Understand and become closer to the classmates	9
	Understand and become closer to the teacher	2
	Total	(11)
Promoting self-reflection	As a learner	3
	As an individual	2
	Total	(5)
Losing confidence	Face the reality of one’s low English abilities	1
	Total	(1)

*Note.* Any one response could contain more than one detail, so the total of frequencies do not add up to 26.

The second category concerns the impacts the course had on the students. Table 2 illustrates that the majority of the students found the course to be motivating for them (24 references). Some referred to the use and learning of English as follows: “The course improved my English. It also made me want to study English more;” “The course gave me courage to speak English. And I kept being motivated to study English after class every week.” Presumably, the students became motivated to learn and speak English more as a result of participating in numerous discussions in English and listening for many hours to the teacher and classmates speaking in English (see Table 1). Other reasons related to higher motivation towards English language teaching (three references) and their dreams to be English teachers (three references). Again, given that one primary goal of the course was to understand basic theories regarding

English language teaching, it was unsurprising that at least some students became more determined to be an English teacher than they were before.

The course also helped to bring everyone together (11 references). One student stated: “I could get to know about my classmates a lot more through the conversational activities. I became closer to them.” Talking with classmates and the teacher, as well as working cooperatively on activities, seemed to have created collegial relationships among them. This was a beneficial outcome of the course for the students, especially because they, as a group of pre-service English teachers at the university, will continue together on their journey towards graduation and perhaps even maintain this association beyond.

Five students referred to increased self-reflection due to the course. This led them to regret not preparing for the course more, speaking up in class more, or being more diligent. Two others mentioned confronting themselves and thinking about their lives in a serious way. For example, one wrote: “In fact I learned in this course that it is important to think about and prepare for the future and figure out what needs to be done while we are university students.” And there was one reference in which a student confessed losing confidence through the course because of his/her own low English ability. This positive and negative feedback motivated me to create and deliver better lessons in the future.

## Discussion

Undoubtedly, I am heartened that the students responded to the course positively due to its unfamiliar teaching styles, which were reported as being different from those in other courses they had taken; its access to personal stories, which proved to be a worthwhile pedagogic strategy in this study; and its content, which was well aligned to the course goals. The narrative frames provided me with this invaluable student feedback, one filled with nuanced and enriched responses, which might have been impossible to get from standard quantitative questionnaires often produced and administered by institutions. The narrative frames offered the students guidance in the structure and content of what should be written and to some extent limited the responses to those I wanted (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2014; Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). The frames helped the students to make sense of their experiences in the course and those they imagined experiencing after the course in an effective way. They thus facilitated the quality of their reflection and increased the reliability of the information upon which to evaluate the course.

Additionally, thanks to the student feedback and my further understanding about the students and the course, I was able to engage in critical reflection on my teaching and the students’ learning, particularly with respect to the EMI approach, a need for a stronger link between theory and practice, and the advantages of communicative teaching and learning methods.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have reported on the feasibility of narrative frames as a course evaluation instrument. Findings suggest that the frames helped the students to write about their impressions of the course and its impact on them. The rich data assisted me to successfully reflect on the content of the course.

Based on this study, I put forward three pedagogical and research implications. First, the repeated use of narrative frames for formative evaluation throughout the semester, rather than only once as in the case of this study, might encourage teachers to make changes while classes are in session. With repetition, students would become accustomed to completing the frames, thereby perhaps increasing quality and quantity of their opinions in both Japanese and English. It might also be helpful for teachers to ask students, if permitted, to fill out narrative frames a few weeks after the course is over because, at that point, (a) they can present their opinions with less inhibition as the teacher is no longer their instructor, and (b) they might be more aware of the impacts of the course on their learning and lives. Second, the students in this study could provide more explicit and precise recounts of their experiences in Japanese. I therefore recommend that participants write narrative frames in their first language, when used as a course evaluation instrument, in order to achieve its central purpose, rather than they write them only in English, as in Hiratsuka (2016). Finally, narrative frames can be combined with other research methods (e.g., classroom observation, focus group discussion, and questionnaires) throughout the semester to gain triangulated and more robust data to inform the creation and delivery of better classroom experiences for all. This could be done as action research (Burns, 2005) at local schools.

The use of narrative frames as a course evaluation instrument can promote worthwhile feedback and discussion on the often uncritically examined practice of course evaluations. Since the findings and discussion presented here were based on just one particular course in one university, I invite others to support or challenge my assumptions, share and

review the data, and explore new insights in order for the instrument to be of maximum benefit.

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## Appendix

Narrative Frames (responses for each space were written on a separate paper)

I took this course because.
I expected this course to be (2) and (3) because (4).
I imagined that I could learn from this course (5) and (6).
(Indeed / In fact) I learned in this course that (7).
I (was excited / became interested / got curious) during the course when (8).
On the other hand, I was (bored / became indifferent / got disappointed) when (9).
In the course, I remember my teacher (10). For me, it was (11) because (12).
I also remember my classmates (13). I thought it was (14) because (15).
At the same time, I remember that I (16). It was (17) because (18).
Now thinking back, I wish my teacher (19) and (20).
I also wish my classmates (21) and at the same time, I wish I myself (22) during the course.
In comparison to (other teachers/ classmates in other courses / other courses), (23).
Overall, this course was (24).
Finally, I would like to say that (25). This is the end of my story.