

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



Explicit instruction of the narrative genre

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Reference data:

Suzuki, S. T. (2009). Explicit instruction of the narrative genre. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

An English teaching curriculum may have various types of academic genres that students must study and learn. This paper will focus on one common genre, the narrative genre, and the explicit instruction of it through a micro-teaching activity which is currently being used with Japanese university students. Explicit teaching of the narrative genre as well as other genres can assist students in identifying patterns in text, and give them a sense of control over a range of language that is used to achieve certain communicative goals. The explicit teaching method covered in this paper also takes an eclectic approach which addresses other important issues that often occur in the language classroom. Valuable insight into practical classroom applications is also shared relevant to the explicit instruction of the narrative genre and EFL/ESL pedagogy in general.

英語教育のカリキュラムには学生が学ぶべき様々なジャンルがあるが、本稿ではナラティブのジャンルに焦点を当て、日本の大学生用の学習活動を通してそれを明瞭に教えることを扱う。ナラティブや他のジャンルの教育は、学生が英文に型を見つける助けとなり、コミュニケーションの目的達成に用いる言葉の使い方を教えてくれる。本稿の教授法は授業で生じる他の重要問題を扱う広範な方法も採り入れてあり、ナラティブ・ジャンルやEFL/ESL教育全般に関わる教室での運用についても重要な理解が得られるだろう。

“The ability to tell a good story or joke is a highly regarded talent, probably in all cultures.”
(McCarthy, 1991, p. 137)

Assisting EFL/ESL students in enhancing their story-telling abilities is a worthy, important undertaking as evidenced by the enduring qualities of popular stories such as “Momo Taro” in Japan, “Peter and the Wolf” in Russia, and “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” in England.

One method for enhancing the verbal and written skills of learners in the classroom is the explicit instruction of the narrative genre. The meaning of explicit instruction in this paper is the overt and full demonstration of the narrative genre including analysis of its structure. This is accomplished through instructor explanations, group and individual activities, and handout materials for scaffolding. The techniques or guidelines provided in this paper are presented in terms of what is actually currently being

used in class, and also in ways to suggest that teachers with an interest can adopt, replicate, and modify this activity to suit their own style, classroom approach, and teaching context.

The next section discusses a discourse approach underlying genre-based instruction, followed by background on the narrative genre, and an argument for its explicit teaching. An overview of the teaching context leads into the procedures of a 10-step micro-teaching activity, followed by comments and reflections, and a closing summary. This paper will share knowledge and valuable insight into practical classroom applications relevant to the explicit instruction of the narrative genre as well as to EFL/ESL pedagogy in general.

Genre is the way a text is staged and structured to achieve its communicative goals and social purposes (Martin, 1984, cited in Eggins, 1994). In more elaborate terms, a number of communicative steps are taken in a text to a point of closure, and these are negotiated interactively to realize a social purpose (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Genres are part of our social knowledge and we acquire them as members of a particular socio-cultural community (Rothery, 1986). There are several types of genres that could be found in an educational context and Table 1 shows some examples.

Explicitly teaching the narrative genre as well as other genres can assist students in identifying patterns in text and give them a sense of control over a range of language that is used to achieve certain communicative goals and social purposes. This specific micro-teaching activity also takes an eclectic approach and attempts to demonstrate both pedagogical effectiveness and flexibility in:

Table 1. Examples of genres found in academic contexts

Type of genre	Main purpose
Narrative	To tell a factual or fictional story
Biographical	To tell the life story of someone
Procedural	To give step by step instructions to make or do something
Explanatory	To explain how or why something happens
Report	To present information about something
Expository	To argue or persuade for or against something

- using handouts and visual displays for scaffolding
- using authentic materials in creating student interest
- displaying balance between writing and speaking
- promoting cooperation through group work
- encouraging autonomous learning
- enhancing critical thinking skills by leading into pressing socio-cultural issues

Explicit teaching of the narrative genre and the activities presented in this paper are rooted in the approach discussed in the next section.

A discourse approach to language teaching

The method of explicitly teaching the narrative genre presented in this paper is based on the premise of a discourse approach to language teaching, which puts the central focus

on the social context of learning and language use, and places special emphasis on three areas: *context*, *text types*, and *communicative goals* (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2001). For Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, context refers to all extra-linguistic aspects and elements that influence the linguistic choices that a speaker or writer makes during communicative interaction. In linguistic terms, text applies to any spoken or written passage of any length that forms a unified whole (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The level of complexity and discourse features affect the type of texts and materials that are selected for a discourse-oriented curriculum, and the communicative goals at both the general and specific level serve as a beacon for the teaching methodology and the learning activities that are implemented (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain).

The narrative genre

Narratives are stories that involve protagonists who encounter, handle, and resolve problematic experiences (Eggs & Slade, 1997). The events that occur in narratives are temporally sequenced, and therefore often use “temporal sequential conjunctions” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) such as “then”, “after that”, and “finally”. The narrative possesses distinctive stages and structure which places this text into its own genre type. These distinguishing stages, shown in Table 2, were first defined and labeled by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972).

Table 2. The stages of the narrative genre

Stage	Purpose
Abstract	To summarize a story and its essence
Orientation	To familiarize listener(s) or reader(s) to time, place and behavioral situation
Complication	To present temporally sequenced events culminating in a problem or crisis
Evaluation	To display attitudes and feelings of the narrator toward the narrative
Resolution	To show how the protagonist resolves the problem or crisis
Coda	To make a point about the text as a whole or to conclude the story

Labov and Waletzky (1967, cited in Eggs & Slade, 1997) argue that these six stages constitute the overall structure of a fully formed narrative. However, they point out that the Abstract and Coda are optional, and that both the Orientation and Evaluation may occur before or as a part of the Complication and Resolution respectively.

In further analysis, Eggs and Slade (1997) identify some problems with the narrative genre stages design posited by Labov and Waletzky. For example, complication generally comes before resolution, although this is not always the case. Additionally, sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the complication and resolution. Eggs and Slade point this out as a problem of trying to fit a portion of text into one discrete stage. These issues will be discussed later in this paper under the key elements students should keep in mind when trying to identify the stages and the moves between them. Eggs and Slade do point out that the strengths of

the narrative genre model proposed by Labov and Waletzky lie in its clarity and applicability. For this reason, the major parts serve as the basic model in the explicit instruction of narrative genre explained in the ensuing sections.

A simplified model

Rothery (1986) focused on the explicit teaching of only three of the six stages postulated by Labov and Waletzky: (a) orientation, (b) complication, and (c) resolution. This may have been appropriate since these three stages appeared to be enough to create acceptable stories, and she was working with native English speaking second grade elementary children who may not have been old enough to understand the entire narrative genre model.

Taking into consideration that the abstract stage is optional as well as my teaching context, which includes 2nd-year Japanese university academic English classes, the decision was made to focus the explicit teaching of the narrative genre on five stages: (a) orientation, (b) complication, (c) resolution, (d) evaluation, and (e) coda. Coda is also optional, but it was included, as it is arguably more significant than abstract while at the same time being easier for the students to understand and produce.

When and why to teach the narrative genre

There are various genre foci that are often found in academic curricula. However, the level of education plays a large role in determining which genres are appropriate. For example, it could be argued that the expository genre would not be suitable at the primary school level and that this genre type

is more appropriate at the high school and university level due to the critical thinking skills required to successfully complete such text types. Additionally, consideration needs to be taken in determining where in the syllabus certain genres should be introduced. Introducing the report genres or expository texts early in the syllabus could run the risk of losing student interest or overwhelming those who are not accustomed to thinking critically.

Good stories are often interesting and engaging, and can serve as lead-ins to topics and activities that are primed for developing critical thinking skills. Additionally, narratives, both factual and fictional, communicate interpersonally in both spoken and written language. Furthermore, good models of narratives are often much easier to obtain than those of the report and expository genres (Rothery, 1986). For these reasons, it could be easier to teach narrative genre early in the syllabus. Moreover, an interesting story that serves as a good model can keep the students engaged and help them identify patterns in the text. This pattern identifying process could help them later in the syllabus when they deal with the patterns of more academically challenging genres which are often not as clear as those found in good narratives.

Rothery (1986) reported that the students who were exposed to the explicit teaching of the narrative genre responded well to this approach, and further reflected that this response was not surprising. She pointed out that through personal experiences of hearing good stories and watching movies, students had already gained implicit knowledge of the narrative genre. Making the knowledge explicit provided them with accessible tools, which could be

used in constructing their own texts. It gave them a sense of control over the language necessary to write full narratives, which in turn could build their confidence in using the language. It is noteworthy to point out that spoken language is different from written language, and although the research by Rothery is focused exclusively on teaching writing skills, the description of the narrative genre is relevant to both speaking and writing, as both utilize the same genre structure and the interpersonal use of language.

The educational context

The following micro-teaching activity has been used every spring semester for the past 4 years with 2nd-year university students at the University of Electro-Communications, located in western Tokyo with a student body of approximately 4,000. The class itself is a 90-minute compulsory academic English class that meets once a week and has an average of 40 students. Most of the students range from 19-20 years old with the occasional transfer student who may be a year or two older. There are 15-16 class sessions per semester.

Three types of genres are explicitly taught in the first semester of instruction. They are the narrative, the procedural, and the expository genres. Narrative is the first genre type that is taught in the syllabus; however, it actually constitutes the shortest duration of time spent in and out of the class by students. The following micro-teaching activity is designed for one 90-minute session and 30-45 minutes of the subsequent session with a homework assignment between them.

Materials

The materials that are used for this activity are divided into two categories, primary and secondary. The primary components consist of: (a) a seven-frame picture story with no written text (see Appendix 1), (b) the actual true story from which the picture story was based along with an authentic photograph (see Appendixes 2a and 2b), and (c) a handout for scaffolding explaining the narrative genre (see Appendix 3). The secondary components are a computer with a projector, which enhance the presentation of the activity. However, the secondary materials are not necessary, as a white board with colored markers, or a chalkboard with colored chalk would work fine.

Procedure

In the following explanation, some comments and reflections provide an additional sense of the social, psychological, and educational context.

Step 1

I divide the class into eight groups of five or so students each. There are several ways to do this; however, even such a straight forward simple task could be done in a creative manner producing a sense of anticipation that could heighten student attentiveness and interest. In this case, a big colorful hat full of eight different types of candy (five or so of each type) is passed around and students reach in and take one. When the students understand what is happening here, they will often laugh and joke, display emotions of joy or even disappointment when they do not get their favorite flavor

or that they get stuck in group away from their friends. However, the randomness of it all seems to instill a sense of fairness and they get to enjoy a little treat and maybe even create new friendships with classmates with whom they are not so familiar. This initial step takes about 5-7 minutes.

Step 2

I pass the picture story out and tell the students that they will have 15 minutes to write a story of what their group thinks the picture story is about. I inform them that how they go about this is left up to their respective groups; however I suggest that one student in each group could be the designated writer and that the other students contribute ideas for each frame or that they divide the frames amongst themselves with everyone in the group writing something. This step is where group cooperation to work toward a common goal comes to the fore.

Step 3

Once the groups finish their versions of the story, I give them instructions for them to share their group's story with other groups. Each member of each group is to share their group's version to another group. Once one member is finished, he or she returns to their group and another member goes off to share the story with a different group. In all, each group should hear five different versions of the story. During this step, students move around the class actively. The combination of sharing their stories and listening to various versions of the story seems to guard against sleeping students. This step, which usually takes about 15-20 minutes,

provides every student in the class with an English speaking opportunity.

Step 4

The students remain in their groups and I tell them that the picture story is based on a true story. I pass out the true story with an authentic class picture on the reverse side. The story is about me having been a victim of bullying when I was a 4th-grade elementary school student. I give the students a few minutes to read and reflect on it. Students in the past have shown great interest in this portion of the lesson because they are naturally curious about any real and interesting story, especially one about the teacher, and they want to compare the real story with the ones they created. It also implicitly exposes them to important socio-cultural issues – in this case, primarily the issue of bullying, which will be addressed in detail in future classes when the argument genre is explicitly taught to enhance critical thinking skills. Another incidental effect of this specific usage is that it is a form of *teacher immediacy* (see Rocca, 2007) where personal connections are made with students, perhaps especially with those who were victims of bullying, witnessed such events, or maybe were even bullies themselves. The sharing of a personal story is an intentional attempt to gain the trust of the students and persuade them to open themselves up to my influence not only as a teacher, but also a person who brings meaningful experiences from which they may learn content beyond the focus of language learning. This step takes about 5 minutes.

Step 5

The handout for scaffolding is passed out and a lecture of approximately 10 minutes follows. I explain the stages of the narrative genre with corresponding example sentences reflecting the discourse moves. Each stage and accompanying sentence is highlighted with its own color. Then, the true bully story is displayed on an overhead projector showing in highlighted colors where the stages are identified in the story. I point out that each stage could be one word, a part of a sentence, an entire sentence, or a collection of sentences. I then draw their attention to some of the problems of trying to fit a portion of text into one discrete stage. For example, in the bully story, “I screamed really loud and attacked him” is considered a resolution. However, it could be argued that it is a complication relevant to the bully. Then, we focus on evaluation, which is weaved throughout the text. Although evaluation is often found before the resolution stage, it can also be spread throughout the text. Finally, I explain that the coda is optional, but a good story will usually have one to signal the ending.

Step 6

Now that the students have been formally exposed to the stages and structure of the narrative genre, I pass a picture out to each group (see Appendix 3b). I give instructions which are similar to those in Step 2. However, this time they are to make a conscious effort to incorporate the narrative genre stages in their story, which I suggest to be about 10 sentences long. They are given 12 minutes to complete the task.

Step 7

Step 3 is repeated with students sharing their group’s story with other groups. This will take 10-15 minutes to complete.

Step 8

The original story of the picture is projected on the screen for them to compare with what they created. Then I ask the students to identify the stages in the text and as they accurately identify a stage, for example the orientation, it is highlighted in color on the screen. This continues until the entire text has been highlighted. By this time, I hope that the students have clearly grasped a good understanding of each of the stages of the narrative genre.

Step 9

After finishing this activity, I give the students a homework assignment to find or make a picture of their own, and to write a story about it. The picture could come from anywhere (e.g., the Internet, magazines, books), or they may take the picture themselves, or even draw one if they like. The purpose is to demonstrate their understanding of the narrative genre and also promote an aspect of autonomous learning, as much freedom is given as to what picture and story the students will make. Students bring their completed story and picture to the next class and share them with the others in their groups.

Step 10

The first 30 minutes of the next class is devoted to the students sharing their pictures and stories with their group members. I am always personally impressed with the creativity and effort some of the students put into this assignment. Some stories are very comical, and the room is filled with bursts of laughter. Other stories are deep and reflective with some moral overtone. After the activity, the assignment is collected for my comments as the instructor and returned the following week. This concludes the explicit teaching of the narrative genre, and we start into a form of the argument genre using the topic of bullying as the backdrop.

Additional comments and reflections

One of the curricular aims at the University of Electro-Communications is the development and enhancement of critical thinking skills. Learning the specific stages of the narrative genre, albeit interesting and enjoyable for many students and important in its own right, was primarily intended to scaffold or lead into other academic and critical thinking topics. However, later in the syllabus when students give presentations based on an argument genre structure, some very interesting things have occurred. Some of the students used an embedded narrative as support for their argument. I then realized that narratives are the most common way of exemplifying arguments (McCarthy & Carter, 1994). The connection was also made to an appropriate statement made by Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2001):

“In writing a narrative one may simply want to tell a story, teach a lesson through analogy, render a complex emotionally loaded message in an accommodating form, or provide the reader with a sophisticated literary experience.” (p. 151)

These embedded narratives were often mini narratives as presented by Rothery (1986) and often only consisted of orientation, complication, and resolution. However, they were presented in an accommodating and effective form to support their thesis. For example, a student who was making an argument against Japan developing nuclear weapons used the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a narrative form to exemplify the dangers of a nuclear Japan. This finding of embedded narratives underscores the importance of language teachers dealing with genres to recognize and distinguish between pure genre types and “mixed genre” (McCarthy & Carter, 1994, p. 62).

It appears the knowledge that the students had acquired explicitly had in effect, provided them with useful devices they could use to effectively develop and manipulate their texts. It seems to have given them a sense of control over the language, and perhaps indirectly gave them more confidence in their writing abilities, at least those relevant to producing narratives.

Conclusion

The central focus of this paper is the explicit teaching of the narrative genre. However, in a general sense, it is noteworthy to point out that an eclectic approach to language teaching is taken utilizing various strategies that contributes to the overall learning process. For example, even small creative

techniques like the candy to create groups mentioned in Step 1 and the authentic photo of my 4th-grade class (see Appendix 2b) in Step 4 are used to generate student attention and interest. The group activities encourage cooperation. The handouts for scaffolding in Step 5 give students a frame of reference which they could refer to in trying to produce the essential stages for their own stories. The freedom of finding or creating their own picture in Step 9 fosters autonomy and keeps them engaged in the activity. Finally, the lesson is used as a spring board to learning and addressing a socio-cultural issue of significant importance—in this case, the topic of bullying. It is also important to emphasize the flexibility of what is presented in this paper. This micro-teaching activity could be modified to satisfy the student needs and context of any reader who has interest in a genre-based approach to teaching.

Steven Taro Suzuki was born in Japan and raised in the United States. He returned to Japan in 1997 and is currently teaching at the University of Electro-Communications in Chofu, Tokyo. His academic interests include genre analysis, Multiple Intelligences, and the use of various media and authentic materials in the classroom.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Akane Yokoo, the artist of the picture story, UEC Professor Yoshiyasu Nishimura, who kindly helped me with the Japanese version of the abstract, and UEC Associate Professor Damian Lucantonio, who offered helpful suggestions that enhanced the quality of this paper.

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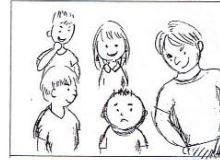
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Appendix 1

The picture story

Artwork by Akane Yokoo

Frame 1



Frame 2



Frame 3



Frame 4



Frame 5



Frame 6



Frame 7



Appendix 2a***The real story and authentic photo*****Beat the Bully**

By Steven Taro Suzuki

Frame 1: When I was nine years old, I was the smallest student in my elementary school class. Also, I was the only Japanese-American child, so I looked very different from other students. So, other students noticed me more often and they would make mean comments about the shape of my eyes.

Frame 2: The largest boy in the class was a bully, and he often made fun of me. One day, he took my school lunch, and told me that he would beat me up if I told the teacher or my parents. Then, he started to take my lunch every day for about four months.

Frame 3: One day, I had forgotten my lunch. Then, the bully said he was going to beat me up, and I was afraid of him because he was so big. Next, he threw me on the ground and started punching me.

Frame 4: He continued to hit me and to my surprise, his punches didn't hurt so much. Finally, I decided that I was going to fight back. Then, I screamed really loud, and attacked him.

Frame 5: The bully was very surprised and quickly became afraid. Then, he suddenly gave up fighting. After that, the other children started to make fun of him, and started to call him bad names.

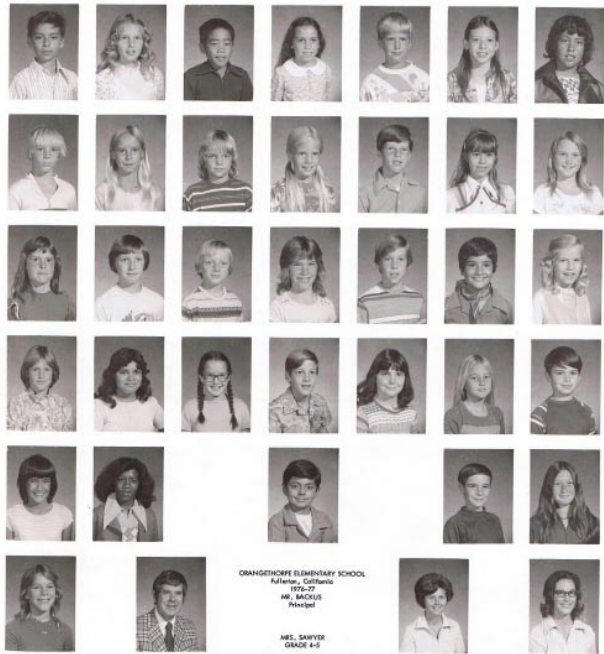
Frame 6: The bully started crying and ran home. I won the fight! I was happy, but I was also angry because I gave him my lunch for four months.

Frame 7: Then, I told the other kids that they should leave him alone. I said that they were being bullies like him and that it was wrong. Afterwards, I became very popular in class and made many friends.

And then I lived happily ever after. The End

Appendix 2b

The real story and authentic photo



Appendix 3a

The scaffolding handout
That's a great story!



An important skill in any language or culture is to be able to tell a good story. There are many ways to tell a good story or narrative, but in simple basic terms, a good narrative often contains these five components, although the Coda can be optional sometimes:

- Orientation*: This tells us the time, place and situation of the story. It may change many times throughout the story.
- Example*: The short heavy bald man went to McDonalds for lunch to eat a Mega Mac.

Complication: This tells us of trouble, problems, etc. that happen in the story. It can also happen many times in the story.

Example: When he ordered the Mega Mac, the shop clerk told him that they were sold out, and then he started crying.

Resolution: This tells us the actions and/or results from responding to the complication(s) throughout the story.

Example: The clerk said, “Don’t cry, you can order two Big Macs and put them together and it will be like a Mega Mac.”

Evaluation: This tells us the opinions and feelings throughout the story

Example: The man was happy and satisfied, and the clerk was impressed and moved.

Coda: This tells us something that ends the story.

Example: They fell in love, got married and had many Mini Macs together. They lived happily ever after.

Appendix 3b

The scaffolding handout

Activity

The picture you have was taken during Game 6 of the 1998 NBA Finals and the teams are the Utah Jazz and the Chicago Bulls.

In your group, try to write a short story based on the picture. Your group’s story should be about 10 sentences long. If you can, try to use all five narrative components in your story. After you finish, decide one person in your group to present your story to the rest of the class.

Homework

Please find any picture you like (Please no real and graphic violence or sex) and make up a story. You will present your picture and story to your group in two weeks or the class after the next class.

Photo source: <http://www.japanprobe.com/2007/01/mcd/11.jpg>