Story-based instruction: Learning language through narrative

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In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan (MEXT) revised the Basic Act on Education. Part of the revision requires introducing foreign language education activities to 5th and 6th grade students in elementary school from 2011. Since the revision, pedagogical issues such as curriculum building, instructional materials, and teaching practices of English language have become a large concern for educators. This paper presents a story-based teaching method for young learners and explores the potential impact of narrative on language learning. The paper also describes how narrative can bolster language learning through engaging young learners cognitively and emotionally. In the first part of the paper, an overview of English education in elementary school is discussed, then the influence of narrative form on cognitive and affective aspects of language learning, drawing on Bruner's narrative theory, is examined. The strengths of a semantic approach to language learning are also discussed. Finally, the paper discusses the criteria for the selection of matched-stories for language instruction, scaffolding theory, and a sample story-based unit the writer conducted in a public elementary school.

2008年に文部科学省（MEXT）は教育法規則を一部改正し、2011年度から小学校第5学年及び第6学年に外国語活動を実施する事を義務づけた。改正以後、カリキュラム編成、指導教材、教授法等の外国語教育に関する問題が教育関係者等の大きな関心事となった。本論文はストーリーベースの指導メソッドを紹介し、物語が学習者の思考と感情に与える影響を検証し、それが言語習得に与える可能性について考察する。まず小学校英語教育の概観について述べた後、ブルーナーのナレティヴ理論を応用し、ナレティヴフォームが学習者に与える影響を思考及び感情の両面から考察する。また内容を重視したアプローチの特長についても議論される。最後にストーリーベース教授法について①物語の選定基準、②スキャフォルディング理論、そして③筆者が小学校で実施したストーリーベース単元のサンプルユニットを紹介する。

According to MEXT (2008), the goals of foreign language education are threefold. Firstly, foreign language education aims to increase students' understanding of foreign cultures and languages through classroom-based activities. Secondly, students should develop positive attitudes toward communicating with people of different cultures by accepting differences between cultures and languages. Lastly, students should become familiar with the intonation and phrases of foreign languages through communicating with others.

A number of schools had started English instruction before the Basic Act of Education was revised; however, it is reported that most teachers lacked the pedagogical knowledge and qualifications to teach English effectively. Benesse Corp. (2006) conducted the first teach-

ers' opinion survey for English education in Japan. According to their report, more than half of schools relied on external educational institutions to develop curricula and instructional materials for each grade of students. The major concerns for the teachers in these schools were:

- a perceived lack of English proficiency to teach the subject effectively (40.5%)
- insufficient time to prepare instructional materials (38.2%)
- a lack of pedagogical knowledge to design an effective curriculum (32.9%).

Responding to the first teacher-perception survey, MEXT published *The Guideline for Foreign Language Education in Elementary School* (2008) and offered *Eigo Note* (2009) as instructional material. *Eigo Note* adopts a communicative syllabus that conforms to the goals of foreign language education prescribed by MEXT. Although the textbook serves as an important resource, it has some constraints. Firstly, almost all language is presented in dialogs in which meaningful contexts are excluded. Secondly, the book lacks meaningful content closely related to foreign cultures.

The purpose of this paper is to present the effect of narrative on language learning and propose a pedagogy of story-based language instruction. The story-based unit included in this paper can supplement textbook-oriented curricula such as the one presented in *Eigo Note*.

A central feature of narrative

Bruner's (1986) theory gives us insights into narrative. Comprehending narratives involves cognitive and affective engagement on the part of the reader. Bruner theorizes "two landscapes" of the narrative form (p.14). One landscape involves "action" which consists of "agent, intention or goal, situation, instrument." Bruner states that a character's action is a projection of the actor's intended effort in the "outer world". The reader needs to interpret the intentional mind of the character, which means the reader must look into the context that triggered the action and infer the character's motives by applying a knowledge of culture and norms based on the society in which the actions occur. Therefore, readers must apply their world knowledge to construct meaning from texts.

The other landscape is "consciousness." It deals with how protagonists "know, think, or feel, or do not know, think or feel" (Bruner, 1986, p.14). Bruner argues a story is told "through the filter of the consciousness of the protagonist in the story"(p. 14); that is, narrative frames readers' minds into that of the mind of the protagonist. The story engages readers emotionally while events unfold. Figure 1 illustrates the two landscapes.

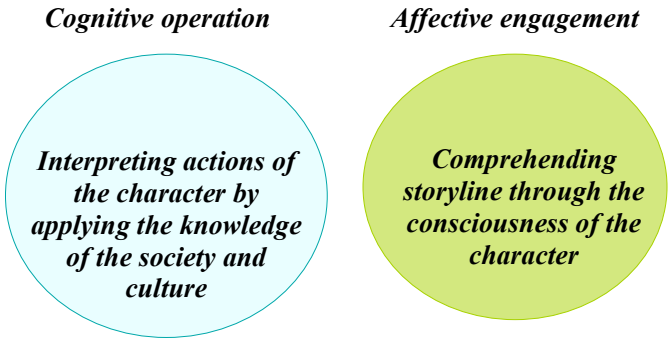

Figure 1. The two landscapes of narrative

Strengths of narrative forms

Compared with discrete language learning such as sentence-based practice, narrative affords meaningful, semantic orientation through the events in the story. Over the past years, a number of studies have shown the strengths of semantic episodic memory. Baddeley (2007) speculates episodic working memory can integrate acoustic and visual information and functions as an interface to long-term semantic memory. Baddeley argues episodic memory binds information from a range of resources, such as the phonological loop and the visuospatial sketchpad, and frames the information into meaningful episodes to make it easier to be integrated into long-term semantic memory. For example, remembering objects from visual input is usually limited in quantity; however, by framing the information into an integrated episode, information can be retained in long-term semantic memory.

Another strength of narrative form in language learning is the dissimilarity of vocabulary that appears in a story. Nation (2000a) argues that Higa's (1963, cited in Nation) study proved learning vocabulary with semantically related meanings or a lexical set of vocabulary may increase interference. Words that have similar meanings and similar functions that may replace each other in the same part of speech (i.e., a shirt, a jacket, a sweater) with a sentence of "I'm wearing," leads to confusion when remembering the meaning of the vocabulary. To summarize, previous research states that (1) episodic memory, which frames various information semantically in prose, helps information to be integrated into long-term semantic memory; and (2) learning vocabulary in narratives is easier than learning vocabulary that is presented as an isolated lexical set.

Story-based instruction

Story-based instruction refers to using narrative as the course of instruction. Story-based instruction units typically consist of several consecutive lessons with extended activities that aim to achieve the linguistic and content goals of the unit. One of the difficulties for planning story-based instruction might be the organization of language instruction. Usually, a story contains a range of authentic vocabulary and forms. Teachers need to design units that incorporate a variety of extended activities to achieve linguistic goals. Next, pedagogical issues such as selecting matched stories and formulating instructional moves will be discussed.

Selecting the story

The first step for successful story-based instruction is selecting a story. Teachers are often concerned about selecting stories that match both students' interests and language learning. The most important aspect in selecting a story is that the story be comprehensible and intriguing. Some criteria for the choice of the story can be classified as follows from the author's experience.

Cumulative development

Stories that develop cumulatively are predictable and often interest students. For example, *Three Billy Goats Gruff* written by Asbjornsen, Moe, and Brown (1985), develops cumulatively in a predictable sequence. In the story, when the three goats pass over the bridge one by one, from the little goat to the biggest goat, the bridge shakes more with each goat as the weight and size of each one increases. This kind of predictable storyline is easy to comprehend.

Stories of accomplishment

Stories that have unusual features or breach conventional storylines enhances students' affective involvement. Bruner (2002) states that a good narrative structure contains obstacles that pre-

vent the characters' attempts to realize their goals and wherein characters must change the situation to overcome obstacles. Famous tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* (Zelinsky & Lesser, 1984) have these features. In stories such as this, protagonists face plights that force them to tackle problems, and children perceive the characters' struggles through the filter of the characters' consciousness. Importantly, the resolution of the problem affords a sense of accomplishment.

Recurrent phrases

Stories that have repetitive, catchy phrases contribute to language learning. Recurrently appearing phrases allow students to become familiar with the sound, intonation, and meaning of the phrases. Classic folktales such as *The Three Little Pigs* (Galdone, 1998) and *The Gingerbread Man* (Aylesworth & McClintock, 1998) are peppered with famous phrases throughout the narratives. When listening to *The Three Little Pigs*, students always participate in echoed reading along with the story. Once students become familiar with the rhythmic intonation of the phrases, they participate in shared reading, in which they read a part of the phrases. Students' participatory reading offers them a chance to practice language in a meaningful context.

Dramatization

Stories that present vivid, dynamic plot changes and characters' unique dispositions are suitable to be dramatized through extended activities. Through the dramatization of stories, either as observers or participants, it is said that students may remember language better than they do when receiving direct instruction from teachers (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). For example, *The Bremen Town Musicians* (Grimm & Watts, 1997), evokes vivid, imaginative movements. Each character also has a unique voice in the story. Enactment of unique character attributes contributes to both comprehending and remembering the meaning of vocabulary.

Moral stories

Moral stories are suitable for content learning. I remember when I read *Yoko* (Wells, 1998) to third graders. In the story, Yoko's mother puts sushi in her lunchbox, but Yoko's classmates disapprove of the sushi and stay away from Yoko. When I read that page to students, I stopped and posed questions, "Why did the classmates react negatively to the sushi?" and "How would you feel if you got a disapproving look from your classmates?" The questions provoked students into thinking seriously about the problem. Additionally, the story related the difficulties of resolving intercultural misconceptions.

The following table illustrates the features and sample titles of each term.

Table 1. Selection criteria

Narrative feature	Sample titles
1. Cumulative development	• *The Mitten* (Brett, 1989) • *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* (Asbjornsen, Moe, & Brown, 1985)
2. Stories of accomplishment	• *Red Riding Hood* (Marshall, 1987) • *Hansel and Gretel* (Zelinsky & Lesser, 1984)
3. Recurrent phrases	• *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Aylesworth & McClintock, 2003) • *The Gingerbread Man* (Aylesworth & McClintock, 1998)

Narrative feature	Sample titles
4. Dramatization	*The Bremen Town Musicians* (Grimm &Watts, 1997) *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (Rosen & Oxenbury, 1989)
5. Moral stories	*The Little Red Hen* (Galdone, 2001) *Stone Soup* (Brown, 1947)

Instructional moves

Successful language instruction depends on the degree to which teachers formulate their instruction according to students' capabilities. Teachers should plan step-by-step activities, each of which leads to successful language learning. This approach draws on scaffolding theory (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The authors argue that children achieve task demands while engaging in a problem-solving task with a more capable adult when:

1. the proficient adult models how to solve the problem
2. she gradually reduces the assistance
3. she gradually releases the responsibility of the task to the child to be solved independently.

Successful scaffolding progresses from teacher-initiated whole class activities, during which the teacher and students engage together in a skill-building or language learning activity, to more independent activities, where students complete task demands on their own. Following are two instructional moves for vocabulary building and reading strategies.

Vocabulary building activity

Before reading a story to students, teachers can scaffold comprehension by pre-teaching key vocabulary through:

- modeling key vocabulary with pictures and asking students to repeat
- using gestures to reinforce meaning
- saying a word and asking students to point a matching picture
- pointing to a picture and asking students to make a gesture that corresponds to the meaning of the picture
- pointing to a picture and asking students to produce the matched vocabulary.

By following these steps, students can first observe the teacher modeling the key vocabulary and then be invited to produce the vocabulary through gestures.

Reading strategy

Scaffolds can be applied to reading comprehension processes as well. Reading comprehension can be guided by teacher-led whole class discussion, during which the teacher shares the skills and strategies necessary to construct meaning from vocabulary in texts (Miller, 2002). For example, the teacher can stop reading at a pre-determined point and pose crucial questions to clarify ambiguous vocabulary. Then she can share her interpretation of the vocabulary. Teachers can utilize the following during whole-class reading instruction:

- posing questions to students, asking them to clarify the meaning of vocabulary
- inferring the meaning of vocabulary from context together with students
- thinking aloud her own interpretation
- giving cues, gestures, or oral cloze tasks to students when vocabulary reappears in texts.

Frey and Fisher (2010) argue that deciding when to move instruction to the next level depends on how far students can accomplish task demands independently. The authors state that, by scaffolding, teachers can model the steps and strategies necessary to comprehend texts through whole-class activities, then gradually reduce assistance to check students' application of the new knowledge. By doing so, teachers assess to what extent the students can apply the knowledge and decide what types of scaffolding is necessary. The aim of scaffolding is ultimately to elicit students' ability to produce solutions independently through the gradual releasing of task-solving responsibilities.

Teaching context

This unit plan is one of a series of story-based instruction units that the author implemented from 2006 through 2008. The context of the unit is described below.

Table 2. Teaching context

Unit title	From Seeds to Harvest
1. Grade	Elementary 3rd and 4th grades
2. Class size	40 students
3. Language Level	Low
4. Timeframe	4 lessons with 45-min each

Goals and objectives

Language outcome

- Students will use the present tense of verbs with objects.
- Students will use the "who" question form with future tense "will".
- Students will sing a traditional nursery rhyme, "Mulberry Bush," using the verses in the story (see Appendix).

Content outcome

- Students will sequence the wheat cultivation process in a separate worksheet.
- Students will learn the ethics of sharing work.

Learning strategies and skills development

- Students will develop reading comprehension skills that involve making predictions and inferring the meaning of vocabulary from context.
- Students will use gestures while participating in shared reading.
- Students will develop fluency through retelling the story using stick paper puppets.

Materials

- The picture book: *The Little Red Hen* (Galdone, 2001).
- Stick paper puppets: Mouse, hen, dog, cat (Figure 2).
- Picture cards: seeds, water can, wheat field, combine harvester, flour, oven, and bread.

Figure 2. Stick paper puppets

Students Responses

After conducting a series of units, students' responses were collected. In the questionnaire, the students expressed their emotional involvement. The following excerpts are responses from 3rd graders after working through a unit based on the story *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* (Willems, 2003). As evidenced in their comments, students were obviously quite emotional about the lesson and story.

- It was the most exciting lesson I've ever had.
- The pigeon was really cute.
- I felt sorry for the pigeon.

In addition, it should be noted that the students retained the vocabulary from the story. One year after conducting two 45-minute lessons based on *The Three Little Pigs*, I visited the students again and was surprised at how well they still remembered language chunks from the unit. Upon hearing phrases from the story such as "Little pig, little pig, let me in. No, no not by the hair of . . .Then I huff and puff . . .," students were able to produce the ends of the phrases from memory. To my surprise, students began to shout the catchy phrases in unison.

Conclusion

Story-based instruction engages students both cognitively and affectively. At the moment, *Eigo Note* is used as the main text in most elementary schools; however, story-based instruction can supplement *Eigo Note* or other conversation-based textbooks. Successful implementation of story-based units requires familiarity with language learning theories and their application in teaching practice. Teachers should select appropriate stories for language learning and plan instruction based on the aforementioned theories of language learning.

Bio data

Akie Kanazono works at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages and other educational institutions and teaches to various age groups including young learners, business people, and senior citizens. Her interests include curriculum building and motivation-study from socio-cultural perspectives.

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Appendix

The lyrics of Mulberry Bush

Original verses	This is the way we wash the dishes, wash the dishes, wash the dishes, This is the way we wash the dishes, So early in the morning.
Verses using the words in the story	This is the way we sweep the floor, sweep the floor, sweep the floor, This is the way we sweep the floor, So early in the morning. … we wash the windows, … we cook the food, …we plant the seeds, … we water the wheat, … we cut the wheat, … we mix the flour … we bake the cake … we eat the cake.