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Using the Narrative as a Scaffold for L2 Speaking Fluency Development

Colin Skeates and Kevin Murphy

Abstract: This practice report discusses the rationale for a task, the Narrative Framework (NF), within a given teaching and learning context. A description is first given of how the Intensive English Program and the students who choose to enroll help shape the task design. Of particular importance is the need for English speaking fluency development. In the second section, the NF is explained, the classroom procedure discussed, and issues concerning assessment addressed. In the last section, a brief survey of the previous research is conducted to better understand the NF and to provide tentative support for its use in the IEP first-year program.

Introduction

In many MA programs, language teachers learn of previous ways that professionals attempted to bring about better language teaching practices to the classroom. For example, in Richards and Rodgers (2001), one chapter is dedicated to each significant language teaching methodology that was in vogue at one time or another. The proponents of each methodology argued that their particular method was the ideal way of learning a language based on a particular theory of psychology.

However, in the mid-1990s researchers began to argue convincingly that language teaching should be tailored to suit the teaching and learning context, not a prepackaged pedagogy. One such researcher was

Kumaravadivelu (1994) who argued that the very concept of a teaching methodology, a single best way of teaching, needed replacing. Kumaravadivelu suggested factors such as efficacy, learner autonomy, meaningful interaction, fostering language awareness be considered in what teachers do. He also argued that the language being learnt should be directly relevant to learners. The general message was not to suggest an end of teaching methodology, but rather a call for teachers to better articulate the rationale for what, why and how they do what is done in the language learning environment, and to adapt the teaching methodology accordingly. A practice report does just this; it enables teachers to turn the focus of a paper from results or findings to what is done in the classroom.

This practice report discusses a task, the Narrative Framework (NF) that has been created to suit the language learning that takes place within one 14-week course, a part of the Intensive English Program (IEP) of the Faculty of Law at Keio University. It begins with a description of the teaching and learning context as it significantly shapes the development of the task (Nunan and Lamb, 1996; p. 9). Part two describes the NF, classroom teaching procedures and how students are assessed. Lastly, previously published language learning research is drawn on to better understand what the NF is and how, at least in theory, it can be justified.

Teaching and Learning Context

The NF is used in a first-year core course for Keio University students enrolled in the Law Faculty's IEP. The IEP runs for two years and was created to give motivated law and political science students more opportunities to study English. To gain admittance to the IEP, students must first be accepted into the faculty and then sit an additional examination. Accepted students take English four times a week. All IEP students have the

same two core courses, taught by the two IEP coordinators. In addition, the students must also select two out of four possible elective courses which are taught by tenured professors. The class size for these core courses are approximately sixteen to twenty students. The core courses traditionally focus on two skills, with one focusing on listening and speaking, while the other has a focus on reading and writing. The NF task was created specifically for the speaking and listening course.

IEP students have a tendency to be quite unique. They have gained admittance to one of the most difficult faculties at Keio University, and have passed a subsequent written test and interview to gain entrance into the IEP. Many previous students are at approximately the B1 level (Council of Europe, 2001) in English language proficiency. A typical B1 student is somewhat comfortable speaking on topics they have had previous experience with, such as introducing themselves, talking about their family, telling a story, and what they like to do in their free time (Council of Europe, 2001; p. 26–29). They also tend to feel fairly comfortable speaking about their clubs and part-time jobs. Though able to talk about these topics, the range in confidence and fluency can be wide. With regard to what first-year students have commonly not been able to do, most would lack the English vocabulary needed to adequately follow a specialized area of study. They also tend to have never made an academic presentation (some have no experience of presenting in English prior to entering the IEP) nor do they necessarily have experience of writing an extended essay.

Previous end of year questionnaires have indicated that IEP students like to speak in English. They easily envision themselves studying abroad while at university, and their intention is often to gain employment that includes the use of English in the workplace. Many take short trips abroad, either before, during, or after their time on the IEP. For a few IEP first-year

students, enrollment in the IEP is a means to gain sufficient English proficiency to move up in second year to the upper-B2 and C1 level English courses. In short, IEP students are motivated and so tasks used in the first-year IEP should maintain or protect this motivation (Dörnyei, 2001).

The main aim of the listening and speaking course has been to further develop student speaking fluency in a manner that maintains student motivation and to provide experiences for the self-directed learning needed once the IEP is finished, when few English classes are offered. With regard to the NF, there are three learning objectives.

1. Over the duration of the course, students will create several recorded instances of spoken output that demonstrates improvement in their speaking fluency.
2. Through explicit teaching of the Narrative genre, students will be able to restate a story using note-taking techniques taught in class.
3. Students will be able to give a 1 to 1.5 minutes oral summary of a story they have watched or read by the end of the course.

The Task

The Narrative Framework is a worksheet that students use to record a story they have either read and/or watched. As it is meant to be something that can be referred to, students are taught how to take notes and are actively discouraged from writing complete sentences. The purpose of the worksheet is to provide scaffolding for the development of speaking fluency. Scaffolding is used here as defined in the Vygotskian sense of supporting students to do a task that they may otherwise not be able to do without support (Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976). The support enables students to organize their notes before doing the spoken task, a one-minute retelling of a

story. By providing students with the NF scaffold, the hope is that they will be able to concentrate more on the spoken output aspects of the retell as opposed to relying solely on lexicogrammar choices. The NF worksheet can be found in Appendix A.

To properly implement the NF, some training is required. Below is a summary of the classroom procedure and suggestions as to how this can be implemented. Note that the classroom procedure provided below contains only what was done as it pertains to the NF, not the entirety of the classroom procedure needed to meet all aims and objectives of the course.

Class one

Part of teaching is based, at least initially, on guesswork. Teachers must create a syllabus and lesson plans based on the assumption that a particular type of student will enroll in the courses they will lead. To remove some of the uncertainty, it is suggested that a needs analysis is implemented that enables teachers to better understand what learners want/need to learn. A needs analysis can easily be done through simple writing and/or speaking tasks (Scrivener, 2005; p. 69). To better understand what students already know of the narrative, it is recommended that teachers ask for a one-paragraph summary of a well-known story. Animated Disney or Ghibli Studio movies are particularly useful given the popularity they enjoy with young people in Japan. Afterwards, the teacher can establish which structural elements of the narrative genre (i.e. Orientation, Problem, Solution, and Coda) are present. From previous experience, it seems coda is often omitted. The single paragraph writing section of the needs analysis should take approximately fifteen minutes.

Class two

Students are taught a variety of different ways to take notes, such as framework notes (heading, subheading and important details), matrix or table notes, and diagram notes. A short lecture on three different types of notes is given and then, in groups, students discuss which format they currently use. Previous experience suggests that students show surprise at the variety of formats used by their peers. Total class time is between fifteen to thirty minutes and is dependent on the interest in the topic shown by students.

Class three

By analyzing the needs assessment, it is clear that a significant number of students are able to recall a story reasonably well. As fluency development is one of the learning objectives, the narrative, therefore is ideal. A beneficial resource for fluency development is through the use of Graded Readers (GR). Graded Readers are books that have been purposefully written with graded lexicogrammar that suit students who are at different levels of proficiency. For example, a level one GR may have words and grammar that a junior high school student would be able to read without a dictionary. Most GR series have multiple levels that would include appropriate material for university level students. In this class, the concept of a GR is introduced, the location in the Media Centre where they can be found is provided, and an explanation of how to choose an appropriate level book is given.

Based partially on Day and Bamford's (1998) recommendation, students choose GRs that are:

1. very easy to understand (students should be able to understand 98% of the words encountered without needing to consult a dictionary),

and

2. interesting (this is based on the assumption that students who are interested in the books they read, will read more of them).

In addition, for the sake of the NF, students are asked to read stories only, as opposed to biographies. Total class time is between twenty-five and thirty minutes.

Class four

In class, students in groups of four are asked to retell the GR story they read for homework. As they were not told prior to class, between three and five minutes of preparation time is set aside before students are asked to put their books away. This means they only have time to write appropriately brief notes needed to aid with the oral summarizing of the story. To prepare for class five, students are asked to read another GR story, but this time everyone in the group reads the same book. Total class time used equals twenty-five minutes.

Class five

During this class, students are introduced to the NF. The introduction begins with an explanation of each move (i.e. Orientation, Problem, Solution, and Coda), and then students, working in groups, complete a worksheet scaffold based on a movie that each class member has seen, such as *My neighbor Totoro* (1988). Afterwards, the teacher takes up the activity, highlighting key parts of each structural element covered. Total class time is approximately forty minutes.

Next, working in groups with students who have read the same GR story, students retell the story. Students are asked to record their retell using their smartphone. Teachers may want to budget extra time for this activity as

many students seem unaware that their smartphone has a voice recorder. Once all students have recorded the retell, each group is asked to determine both the good and the bad points of each member's retell. Afterwards, during the whole class debriefing, the attention of each student is focused on improving delivery. As the focus is on fluency, new language items, at this point, can be ignored. Total class time is approximately thirty minutes.

In the final part of the class, an explanation of the midterm speaking test is given. Students are informed that they will watch a short story movie (three to six minutes), take notes, fill in the NF, and then (using only the NF) record a one-minute retell of the film. As they will need to send the file to their teacher during the test, the recommendation is students send the one-minute retell they created in class to themselves via email. For homework, students read another GR but are informed that it will not be used until class nine. This usually takes approximately fifteen minutes.

Class six

In this class, the aim is to confirm that students understand the midterm speaking test. To further prepare students for the test, the teacher explains the test procedure. After the explanation, students are given a blank NF and shown a short film. After viewing the film, students working in groups check each other's NF and then once again record the retell using their smartphone. Once they are ready, a discussion is had on the good and bad points of each other's retell.

During this class students are informed that they cannot simply restate the pattern of the genre in their retell. Instead, students need to retell the story as a story. It should be noted that in the IEP, most students are already trying to do this. As the coda is sometimes difficult to understand, the conversational stem, '*One thing I found interesting is ...*' is introduced.

To give further preparation for the midterm examination, the suggestion that students form study groups is made. In addition, how to search for short movies on YouTube is demonstrated and an electronic copy of the NF is sent to all students. Previous experience indicates that rather than establish predetermined study groups, it is better to end the class early and allow students time to create their own groups. Total class time spent on the above is approximately twenty-five minutes.

Class seven

The midterm speaking test is administered. Approximately seventy minutes is set aside to do the test, with the remainder of time needed to deal with any technical difficulties that may occur. Before the test begins, the teacher explains the test format whereby the students will watch a movie three times and will then have twenty minutes to record the retell and send it as a sound file to their teacher. While watching, students must take notes and organize their thoughts on the NF. At any time during the viewings students may start to write the NF. In addition, students may choose to begin to record the retell once their NF is complete; they do not need to wait for the short film to stop. The only stipulation is that once they begin to record the retell, they must only use the NF and cannot make changes to it.

Class eight

To begin, students prepare (phone, pen, water, tea) and the teacher distributes a blank note-taking paper and NF. The teacher's email address is written on the board. After the third viewing of a short movie, students are encouraged to get up and move to a different part of the classroom or even to move outside the classroom. The teacher circulates and monitors each student's progression. Near the end of the test period, the teacher indicates

the remaining time. Students re-enter the classroom. On an overhead projector, the teacher's email inbox is shown and students check their to see that their email and sound file is there. Experience suggests there may be technical difficulties, such as Wi-Fi issues or phone problems that teachers are advised to troubleshoot. Lastly, students hand in their NF.

Class nine

The teacher hands back the midterm examination results. Common problems include problem-solution mismatch, and confirming issues with coda (this is discussed further below). At this point the main language errors are discussed, if any exist. Once the midterm is returned, a slightly longer version of the NF is introduced for the final speaking examination (see Appendix B), which includes *a sequence of events* move and an opinion section. Students do a retell of the GR story they read in class five, incorporating the new parts. Total dedicated class time is approximately thirty-five minutes.

Class ten, eleven, and twelve

Training is mostly done at this point. Here the teacher provides time in class for students to watch a short film, take notes, record retell, and discuss recorded performance with other students. In the IEP, it has been prudent to reorganize the groups each week. Total class time each week is approximately twenty-five minutes.

Class thirteen or fourteen

Administer the final speaking test. Follow the same procedure as the midterm (class seven). Depending on the class, the time limit for the retell is expanded to 1.5 minutes. Total test time is approximately between seventy

and seventy-five minutes.

Assessment

The midterm and final exam assessment follow the same procedure. Both have two sections. The first section is the paper NF, while the second pertains to the sound file. The blank note-taking paper is not assessed, rather it is for students to refer to when filling out the NF paper. The NF paper is handed to the teacher in the same order as the student emails appear in the teacher's inbox. This cuts down time spent trying to match the NF to sound recordings.

To assess the NF, it is first checked to see if all parts are filled in. There are often mismatches between the problem the main protagonist faces and the solution, particularly in the midterm examination. As some short films may have more than one problem, it is suggested that each paper be marked based on what the student has written, as opposed to some preconceived answer sheet. Another problem area is a lack of sufficient information to explain coda. Lastly, another common problem on the midterm is that students try to write too much, attempting to write a script of what they want to record. As the NF is meant to be in note-form only, students should only use it to jog their memory for what they intend to say. They are inclined to do better on this point on the final examination.

Concerning the assessment of the submitted sound file containing the one-minute retelling of the short film, it is here that we see significantly different performances. There are two common areas where mistakes occur. The first includes speaking for too long. As the examinations are also meant to help develop fluency, the time limit is strictly adhered to. Students have one minute to summarize the story and must be within ten seconds either way (i.e. between fifty seconds and one minute and ten seconds). The second common area of mistakes concerns not providing enough clarification on

one or more of the elements and/or the use of vague language. In an effort to be within the time limit, essential information may be cut or a very broad summary is given. Despite this, most students are able to state the essential information within the time limit.

Theoretical Support

With a description of the teaching and learning context and how the task is implemented and assessed, it is important to consider the implications of previously published research in support of the use of the NF. There are two areas to pay particular attention to: the decision to apply the narrative genre as used by systemic functional linguistics, and to what extent the use of the NF supports speaking fluency development.

Genre

As Biber and Conrad (2009) state, the concept of genre is often unclear as it means something different depending on the field one refers to. By selecting the meaning of genre as used in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), much of the confusion can be dispelled as each genre is explicitly structured. The following section explains a little of SFL, where genre comes from, and some of the advantages that come from using SFL-informed material in the IEP first-year program.

In SFL, genre is viewed as part of a social semiotic system (Halliday and Matthiessen, 1999, p. 605), meaning it is realized through language, or more specifically, the language viewed above the level of the clause (Martin and Rose, 2007). Genre is seen as a product of social exchanges between people that occur in everyday life (Martin and Rose, 2007; 2008). These exchanges occur in patterns. Humans depend on these patterns to communicate, as they are a resource that allows us to understand each other.

It is for this reason that SFL researchers such as Halliday (2007) strongly advocate explicit instruction of genre be included well before the tertiary education system begins, with some even arguing for its inclusion as early as primary school (Christie, 2005; Martin, 2000).

To contextualize the discussion of the meaning of a genre, an example of one genre commonly found across the world is used, the narrative (Martin and Rose, 2008; p. 49). In Table 1 is a fictional example of a narrative. The narrative is realized by a set of elements that can be stated as orientation - complication/evaluation - resolution - coda, with orientation, complication/evaluation, and resolution as mandatory. In Table 1, complication/evaluation has been substituted for problem and sequence of events to allow the structure to be more pedagogically friendly for students.

There are three main assumptions about the advantages of using the narrative with IEP students. As previously stated, students come into the IEP already possessing a great deal of knowledge of the narrative. They have undoubtedly had countless encounters with the genre. By explicitly teaching the elements of a narrative, the assumption is that it provides students with a vocabulary and structure with which to articulate their own stories. This is useful as in the second semester they are asked to keep a video journal (Skeates, 2012) and many decide to speak of personal stories.

Another perceived advantage concerns how using the NF helps students in their second year. A second year IEP core course involves the study of marketing. In this course, students are asked to make presentations and, in the second semester, create a business case study. By teaching the elements of a narrative, students observe how important it is to organize information in a way that others can better understand what is being communicated. In addition, students also think of how the information they interact with is organized, including their content (lecture) courses in Japanese.

Table 1: An example of a narrative

Orientation

Last weekend I wanted to visit my brother in Shizuoka.

Problem

But it took me nearly fifteen hours to do a two-hour journey.

Sequence of events

I was going to visit him because it was his birthday, so I booked a ticket from Tokyo to Shizuoka on an express train. I had been working very hard all week and was feeling very tired, but I got to the station and made the train on time. While I was sitting on the train the rocking made me feel even more tired and I fell asleep. When I woke up, I was at the last station, Nagoya! I had been sleeping when my train stopped at Shizuoka, and it had continued straight on to the last station.

Resolution

Because I had taken a late train, there were no more services back to Shizuoka, so I had to wait on a bench all night in Nagoya until I could take the first train back.

Coda

I finally arrived at the right station, but I was so tired from my sleepless night in Nagoya and I was feeling very stupid for falling asleep and missing my station.

A third possible advantage, though closely related to the second, is that by using the narrative structure in class, it enables IEP students to move beyond thinking of language only as words and grammar. This is seen as important as students who aim to be at the B2 level are able to begin the process of understanding more academic topics (Council of Europe, 2001). Academia has its own genre (Christie, 2005; Johns, 2002, Paltridge, 2001) and so explicit instruction of a genre students already have knowledge of provides a way forward to teach subsequent lesser known or unknown genres.

Using the narrative to develop speaking fluency

Similar to the problem with the concept of the genre, fluency is difficult to define. For example, Schmidt (2000, p. vi) points out that words such as fluent and fluency are everyday expressions that are not easily defined. Interestingly, Segalowitz (2010) makes a similar point. Despite this, fluency is a term that is familiar to many language teachers.

One way forward is to refer to Paul Nation's research into vocabulary learning and fluency. He defines fluency as the "ability to process language receptively and productively at a reasonable speed." (Nation, 2014; p. 11) With the exception of the phrase *reasonable speed*, what makes this definition appealing is its simplicity, with all other aspects of the definition operationalized (see Segalowitz, 2010) and, therefore, addresses Schmidt's previous criticism.

According to Nation (2014, p. 15), an activity or task is seen to aid fluency development if the following four conditions are met.

1. "The learners' focus is on receiving or conveying meaning."

The first condition above is based in part on learner choice. In all the retelling tasks in class, the stories that learners summarize are stories they

have chosen. In addition, after the first retell activity students are aware they are going to share what they have read/ seen with their peers. This use of peer pressure, it is assumed, heightens a sense of sharing genuine meaning.

2. “All of what the learners are listening to, reading, speaking, or writing is largely familiar to them. That is, there is no unfamiliar language, and there are largely familiar content and discourse features.”

Learner choice again plays a role in meeting this condition. It is because of this condition that the orientation for selecting GR books in class three is particularly important.

3. “There is some pressure or encouragement to perform at a faster than reasonable speed.”

To meet this condition, the role of oral repetition is important. In class, students can be seen rehearsing what they want to say. It is also recommended that teachers keep a tight hold on time when students do their retells in class. During the midterm and final exams, much of the time is spent rehearsing for the retelling of the movie. Part of the training is adding the time pressure over time. Surprisingly, shortening the retell time is harder than lengthening it, as students must make difficult decisions as to what to say and what to cut. For some students, summarizing the story into one or one and half minutes can be considerably stressful.

4. “There is a large amount of input or output.”

This is part of the reason for continuing to assign GR stories and to set aside class time for students to watch short films. Doing the retells in class means more structured output. The suggestion that students form study groups is also made with this principle in mind.

Learning from conducting a practice report

This process of attempting to state the learning and teaching context, describe the task, the classroom procedure and assessment, and then search the literature for support of the task has been rewarding. For example, the review of the literature in support of the NF has been positive. Through reviewing the literature, a potential for future professional development was discovered.

The normal application of SFL-informed material in the EFL contexts tends to focus on the teaching of language items (e.g. Jones and Lock, 2011). In the SLA triadic framework of Accuracy, Fluency and Complexity teaching of language items is seen as being at odds with fluency development (e.g. Skehan and Foster, 1999). However, Nation suggests that the teaching of language items might actually aid fluency development if taught in word chunks (i.e. if taught in a string of words that are commonly said as a single chunk of language). An example of word chunks would include collocations such as “How are you?” and conversational stems, such as “One interesting thing I liked was ...” (Nation, 2001, p. 319).

Currently, the NF is taught with very few actual teaching interventions involving language item instruction out of consideration of hindering students’ fluency development. Contrary to our ideas, Nation’s suggestion to teach language items in chunks means it will aid fluency development. This new insight provides direction for future possible research.

In closing, for those teachers who are perhaps new to teaching or new to researching language learning, the practice report is an easier way to share their teaching pedagogy. It is strongly recommended that other teachers write practice reports on tasks they have created to suit their particular learning and teaching context.

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Appendix A

Name:	Id#:	Date:
Narrative Framework		
Orientation:		
Who: (<u>underline main characters</u>)	Title of story:	
Where:	When:	What:
Problem:	(Re)solution:	
Coda:		
	What?	Why?
1.		
2.		
3.		

Appendix B

Name:	Id#:	Date:
Extended Narrative Framework		
Orientation:		
Who: (<u>underline main characters</u>)	Title of story:	
Where:	When:	What:
Problem:		
Sequence of events:		
1.	2.	
(Re)solution:		
Coda:		
	What?	Why?
1.		
2.		
3.		
Opinion:		
Opinion:		
Reason:		
Example/ explanation:		