Narrative Strategies in an EFL Classroom: An Experiment

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Abstract

This article is divided into two parts. Part 1 focuses on the events that took place in teaching the class as a whole. Part 2 presents a case study of five learners who, because they had serious problems, both attitudinal and other problems, received special attention and additional support.

The study had two main aims. The first was to respond to the request made by the school principal to help with the problems of teaching English, particularly in one of the high-school classes. The problem was that although the class had learnt English for eight years, they could neither speak nor write it. More importantly, they had built totally negative attitudes toward the learning of the language. The second was to satisfy my own desire to find out how, as a non-native teacher, I could respond to the problems by putting into use different strategies that I had acquired in confronting similar situations over the years.

Introduction

An experiment was carried out in an EFL class (age group 14-15) inside a state-run high school in the twin cities of Hyderabad-Secunderabad. The experiment lasted approximately 35 weeks, but I will deal only with some main events as milestones in learner development. Therefore, lessons 1 to 12 do not refer to the serial order of actual classroom lessons.

The study began with a discussion between the class teacher and the experimenter regarding the English attainments of the class that had had eight years of schooling in English. It showed that not only had teaching resulted in a total failure of many pupils to think their own thoughts and express them in written English, but also in a widely shared belief that being able to do so was an unattainable goal.

I also learnt soon that the majority of learners had a multitude of problems in learning English: in the language's structure, including tenses, agreement, word order, and verb usage, as well as problems with punctuation and spelling. There were also serious attitudinal problems:

a. A complete loss of faith in themselves and in the system, and thereby in the learning of English
b. The fear that accompanied their using and learning of this foreign language
c. The despair, distrust, and discomfort with the methods employed
d. Loss of face and the ridicule that had become part of the daily learning experience in the English class
e. The resultant hatred and distaste for the learning of the language

The Classroom Experience

Accepting this as a major challenge, I saw an urgent need to find the best ways(s) towards a major attitudinal change alongside tangible improvements in their performance. With the aim of the study thus being to use the most appropriate classroom strategies to bring about the required changes, I set to work to gather appropriate genres of English. In particular, the narrative (broadly defined) became the main tool for learning. I put to work short plays, dialogues, news items, everyday situations faced by the students, popular songs, and simple poems. (I had used similar materials during the 1990s in Southeast Asia, especially in Singapore, with students from the Island State and also from Mainland China). Day 1 began with a writing task entitled "about myself." On examining the responses, I found that the failure to write could, in important ways, be attributed to the pupils' inability to put together the intended meanings. This was partly because of major deficiencies in areas such as sentence structure, tenses, word order, agreement, and so on. An example is contained in students' responses:

> A.J. (learner's name): My home was so nice and beautiful and the home was no complains and they were stay very nice. Sisters are two learning on a school and also are brothers. I was become doctor and I help in patients. I am study in science life and get more knowledgement. My friend was very nice and helped me and also good behaviours me.
> S.K: Because this subject English doing I have very cool. I want to become engineering because their doing very hard work.
> S: I like all subjects but I most like maths best.
> N: I am live in Tarnaka.

(While I was looking through his work, an Urdu-speaking student asked me if I had come to teach them English. From his tone I inferred his dislike for the subject, which was shared by the majority. My reply was, "I shall not teach you anything but only tell you some stories." This appeared to give him some relief and he thanked me.)

I knew what my very first task was. It was to get the class interested in the subject, and then, over a period of time, help them gradually to regain their lost confidence and engage tasks with at their level in order to become, à la Krashen (1984), members of the club who speak and write English. Paying specific attention to students' individual and shared weaknesses formed part of the experiment's larger aim.

The stories took different shapes. Their lengths varied, as did their subject matter. From stories about everyday events, to those reported in the local daily newspapers or magazines, to those found in the epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Included, for example, were accidents witnessed on the way to school or events at home the previous evening. A simple anecdote came in handy, as did reports of major events, Indian or from other parts of the world. The stories were discussed in groups and written and presented by each group to the class. Only a part of what happened in the class can be referred to below in the somewhat sequential presentation that follows.

I started the first presentation by drawing a picture with a mountain in the background. I drew some trees and a hut, and invited individual pupils to add to the drawing—a waterfall, bushes, animals, trees, and so forth. Then, the students were to write the stories that the drawing represented to them. The responses had to be short, individual compositions.

Lesson 2 started by going over the previous lesson. Here, I reformulated the unclear parts. As found in Cohen (1983a), I tried to grasp the message the pupils meant to convey. Here is part of what I did:

Table 1. Reformulation of Student Stories

	Original	Reformulated
1	Garden is having many trees.	The garden has many trees.
2	Animals is running.	The animals are running.
3	Bushes looks nice and beautiful.	The bushes look nice and beautiful.
4	Flowers smells nice.	The flowers smell nice.

The process represented in Table 1 often necessitated my sitting with the student and using his or her L1 to understand what he/she meant in each. This was done to retain the original idea and the intent of the sentence in the reformulation that would follow.

In class we discussed both the students' original sentences and also the reformulated ones. The students were asked to write the compositions a second time to enable them to grasp and incorporate the reformulated sentences. Reformulation has been recommended as a highly rewarding feedback to EFL writing. Allwright et al. (1984), Cohen (1983b), and Levenston (1978) have defended its use with considerable evidence in its support. There is a difference, however that needs attention. Most of

them have argued for native-speaker reformulation. I found it impractical, partly because finding a native speaker would not be possible for every class. More importantly, it became clear that in order to give adequate attention to the meaning and intent of the student-writer, it helps to know exactly what she/he means to convey. On many occasions this can be best done by asking him to express it in his L1 or other strong language (see Johnson (1996) for a similar belief), which requires a teacher who shares the student's language. (This point will receive further attention in the following section.)

It may also help to make clear the difference between *reformulation* and *reconstruction*. Most language teachers reconstruct when they correct their students' errors. In my opinion, reformulation serves the goal better in that it offers the student-writer information on how a proficient writer would have said or written the same sentence.

Lesson 3 began with a news item from the local daily newspaper describing an accident, which I wrote on the blackboard. Using the native language where necessary, I made the point that a news item was best viewed in three parts. Part one gave the news in a nutshell. Part two described the details of what happened, where and when it happened, and so forth, and part three showed its consequences and the follow-up action taken to help the situation. The class then sat in groups, did some brainstorming on the events and came up with group reports of the event.

Lesson 4 gave the students the task of converting the news item into a story. Once again, I reformulated parts of the individual pieces of writing and let the students look at the compositions again to understand the differences.

Lesson 5 began with another story, one of a princess with a vertical black mark on her forehead. I narrated part of the story and left it to the class to complete it the way they wanted. The class worked in groups and each group discussed their preferred options for 20 minutes. This time most learners wrote their individual stories. Several stories were read aloud and a few found a place on the classroom walls, on the display board and in the class record book.

Lesson 6 tasked the class with writing a story using three character webs: with 'the king,' 'the barber' and 'the barber's wife' as a source. These webs are shown in Appendix A.

I briefly introduced each web and followed it up with narrating part of the story, leaving the class to build it the way they saw its proceeding to its natural ending. Several interesting stories emerged, and a few were read aloud and discussed in the class. I used their products to explain the structure of a story—a beginning, middle, and end. I also explained the use of a few sequence markers at appropriate places in the narrative.

Lesson 7 began with a news item from the *Hindu,* a national daily newspaper, about a three-month old baby being stolen along with its parents' car, and then abandoned by a refugee camp in Israel. This true story received much attention and excitement, and the task set was accepted with a great degree of enthusiasm. I asked the class to think of themselves as relatives or close friends of the family, and briefly express the feelings about the happenings. Most students enjoyed the experience and wrote imaginative pieces about how they would go about rescuing the baby.

Lesson 8 started with my reading aloud a newspaper story about a special university in Andhra Pradesh that had made values education part of its curriculum. Five values received special attention, namely, truth, righteousness, peace, love, and nonviolence. I wrote a simpler version of the news item on the blackboard, and let the students read it. Then I gave them a task to describe an imagined visit to that university and a meeting with its founder, Sri Satya Sai Baba. [1]

The lesson that came next took off from the previous one. It provided an account of another major contribution of the Baba—one brought to the class by a student. It was a description of the medical center found in the Young World column of the same newspaper. Of special interest was the manner in which the services offered by the center are made accessible to every patient free of cost, and also how values education once again formed an important part of the centre's functioning. The students wrote on the type of social work they would enjoy doing to help the poor, the needy, and the sick. I had put some difficult words on the blackboard and explained their meanings.

From time to time, students also wrote about what they did at home after school. I encouraged this journal writing to get them used to the idea of writing about events in a sequence. An excerpt from one student's writing, which also shows success with the use of sequence markers, serves as an illustration:

> After coming back from school, I took a bath. Then I had a cup of tea and two dose. After that I finished my homework. Next, I went for a walk. When I came back I watched two TV programmes. These I watch regularly because I like them very much. At 8 p.m I had my dinner. Then I studied up to 10.30 in the night. Finally, at about 11p.m I went to bed."

Lesson 12 was focused on Deepavali, the festival of lights, which was just about ten days ahead. A Muslim student had read an account of `Samudra Manthan' (the churning of the sea) in a local language newspaper and asked me to tell them the story in English. The story is about how gods and their enemies, the 'Asuras' got together to churn the ocean and bring out precious things from it. The story interested the class so much that they showed a desire to act it out. I set it out as a short play and gave different students different parts to play. The student who had read the story became Lord Shankara in the play. The reason, as he expressed it, was that he wanted to drink up all the poison of the sea and make sure that his throat also turned blue like that of

Lord Shiva's. The preparation, rehearsals and the presentation proved to be a great experience.

Put together, the twelve lessons should show the kind of activities, tasks, and strategies used over the duration of the experiment. In time, everything seemed to fall into place. I would tell the class a story, or a student would read out or act one. There would then be questions and queries on it and, in most cases, group discussions would follow. A task like the following would be given:

1. What do we learn from this story?
2. What would you do if you were in a similar situation?

A lot of good things happened as a result. These included:

1. The class began to get over the negative attitudes, fear, and suspicion they had built about learning English. Many came out freely to say what they wanted. They took part in different activities without fear or shyness.
2. The learning atmosphere became more congenial and comfortable; even laughing at each other's performance became an accepted part of learning.
3. Group work became a regular part of class work. Students loved to sit in groups, brainstorm a topic, take notes and then set about writing. Doing so became a regular pattern.
4. The class began to become aware of the mistakes they made in their grammar, spelling, or word use and sought my help to set them right. Brief whole-class discussions of common errors also took place at regular intervals.
5. As the days passed, I began to experience a degree of peace and tranquility. Routine work gained a kind of rhythm and for me there were visible rewards in what began to happen. Everybody was working, including the weakest ones. The English period was no more a hated hour. Everyday asking of questions like `What shall we do today?' or `Is it my turn to read out the news?' became the normal practice. The atmosphere had definitely changed for the better and there was visible movement towards cooperative learning.

Individual Attention

Part 2 was carried out simultaneously with five students who, I found, needed special attention as they had shown more serious problems of both attitude and expression. Here is part of what they wrote at the beginning of the experiment, with a brief explanation where necessary. (For confidentiality, their names have been changed to initials.) *N*'s first piece of writing had the following sentences in it: "My become is teacher. My like is subject maths. My sister is three." In the first sentence, she wanted to express her desire to become a teacher. In the second, the sense was that she liked maths of all the subjects, and in the third, that she had three sisters.

M, a boy, wrote: "Sisters have two, brothers two," meaning that he had two brothers and two sisters. *S*, another girl, wrote: "My become is teachers. Sisters three are. To mean she wanted to be a teacher and she had three sisters." *F*, a boy, wrote: "Two brothers and I am," that is, that they are in all three brothers. Finally *A*, the third girl, wrote: "English that subject very interes," to mean that what interested her the most was English as a subject. (In Telugu, she put it as *naku English chala ishtamu*).

I sat with each of them and asked them for native speaker equivalents of what they had written or what they meant to convey. (Four of them spoke Hyderabadi Urdu, also called Deccani Hindi, and the fifth Telugu.)

N explained her sentence "My become is teacher" in the following words, "Like you miss, you teacher, I teacher." I decided to bring in the native language, and here is what followed. Only the L1 (Urdu) sentences are provided here (Urdu: What do you want to become? "*Aap kya bannana chahti hain?*" I asked. She answered, (Urdu) "*main Teecher banana chahti hun*."

I want to become a teacher. I reformulated her sentences, and put them on the blackboard. For her second sentence: "My like is subject maths," I asked her (Urdu) *"Apko Konsa subject Acha lagta hai?" "Maths acha lagta hai,"* she answered.

We used the same strategy to show her "I like maths the best" as the correct form. Her third sentence "My sister is three," she translated into colloquial Urdu, "bahna teen hain," meaning she has three sisters. My understanding of her original sentence ("My sister is three.") was that she had a three-year old sister.

In all this, what became clear was that these students were using their native language patterns in English. For example, look at *S*'s sentences again: "Sisters three are." In colloquial Urdu (*Bahna Teen hain*), the three words in sequence come closest to 'I have three sisters.' "Two brothers and I am" (*Mere Do Bayiyan aur main*) is the equivalent of the English sentence 'We are three brothers.' This is an example of everyday Hyderabadi Urdu, and potentially shows the transfer of the same pattern into English.

Looking at all such sentences, I saw the dominant patterns of the learners' first or strongest language, which got in the way of their use of the patterns of English. Since these concepts were clear in their use of the native language, it would help to make the native language a support (on this point also see Friedlander, 1990). In the case of this group, a main roadblock thus was their problem with English word order.

I asked the students to rewrite and re-speak their sentences in standard Urdu, and helped them where necessary. Making them move in stages, from colloquial to standard Urdu and then to English, appeared to make the task more manageable. This

obviously demanded additional effort but seemed to work better. The use of L1 provided, as Shamash (1990) observes, "a natural bridge for overcoming problems of vocabulary, sentence structure and language confidence" (p. 72). It also gave students a sense of security and allowed them to express themselves freely.

In working with this small group of weaker students and making use of their native language as a resource, I found that the belief that a learner's L1 needs to be kept out of the English classroom required rethinking. I saw a point in what West's (1926) experiments had shown over eighty years ago in his work with primary-level pupils in British Bengal. In other words, the ability to read is, in good part, a general ability that can be transferred from language to language. His results have since been confirmed, and extensions of studies have shown that transfer takes place not just in reading but equally in writing (see, for example, Cummings, 1988). Where a child has a firm grounding, or what Cummins calls CALP –cognitive and academic language proficiency (1981) in his or her "strong" language, it pays to build on that knowledge and those skills and abilities/processes in the language being learnt (see also Riviera 1988, 1990). In his discussion of the place of L1 in TEFL, Atkinson (1987) also offers several potent reasons for using the learner's learnt language as a resource. He says, "I contend that the potential of the mother tongue as a classroom resource is so great that its role should merit considerable attention and discussion in any attempt to develop a post-communicative approach to TEFL for adolescents and adults" (p. 241).

I made use of my students' native language whenever I worked with this group of five weak students needing special attention. One day one of them got out his Telugu (L1) reader and asked me, "Miss, can I write this story?" 'What is it called?" I asked. "'Sita Suyamvara'—Sita's choosing her husband," he answered. I said, "Go ahead." He was very happy and started writing—translating it from the Telugu text he had in front of him. The other four followed suit. They asked me the equivalents of words such as *rishi*, *tapasvi*, and *muni*, which I supplied. They went on writing the story with little hesitation; I was there to offer help when asked for. (On this point, see Atkinson, 1987.) Atkinson, too, found that given the opportunity, learners choose to translate without help or encouragement; this was of use in my case. But several other recent studies offer further support to the finding that L1 can be a rich resource rather than an obstacle. Osborne and Coveleski (1991) for example, say, "There is no need for teachers to become overly anxious if students choose to employ translation as a composing strategy at times" (p. 15).

I felt happy that the students were able to use this strategy, and at the end of the hour, they had put together a few readable accounts of how Sita chose her husband Ram, and how among hundreds of princes who had come to try their luck at the ceremony, he alone could break the 'Gandhiva', the massive bow of Lord Shiva, and win the hand of Sita.

Throughout this period, I allowed learners to use their L1 when they needed it the most. Such occasions included those a) when they wanted to say something and could not say it properly or fully in English, and b) when their peers did not understand the instructions given in English. This made the learning more rewarding, kept at bay the fear of failure, and created a conducive atmosphere for effective and enjoyable learning. Some writers of today would call this a humanistic approach to teaching.

On a few occasions over this period, I also saw the need to rely on the language I shared with them—in most cases their L1, or a in a few their learnt L2—when I found the pupils "tongue tied" and not able to get at the right word(s) or other appropriate lexical items to express their meanings.

I also found it useful to use L1 to check comprehension. I would, for example, ask them to translate a sentence like "Ram broke Shiva's bow in no time" into their first languages. Their translation equivalents showed differences but in each case they conveyed the meaning:

1. Ram broke the bow in a second. *(Eke pal main toda)*
2. Ram broke the bow at once. *(Ekedam tod dala)*
3. Ram broke the bow immediately. *(Turant tod dala)*
4. Ram broke the bow in the twitching of an eye. *(Eke palak main tod dala)*

Doing so gave me the realization that this type of activity helps the learner to see how the two languages differ in their form, use, or other semantic features. Widdowson (1979) perhaps expresses the same view more aptly when he says that it helps the learner develop the ability to distinguish between structural, semantic and pragmatic equivalence of languages.

On a small number of occasions, I also made use of the native language as a check on instructions. This helped me make doubly sure that the learner clearly grasped the intent of my instructions. Discussing unclear sentences like "My become is teacher' or "My like is subject English,' and asking them to do a quick mental translation of such sentences helped them see that what they had written wasn't clear. Once they realized the problems in their writing, there were ripples of laughter around the class. This showed that building awareness of such failures in writing helps the learner to transfer meanings from L1 to L2. More importantly, it highlights the futility of word-for-word translation and the relative strengths of translating meanings across languages. (On this also see Danchev, 1982.)

It was also important to teach students to translate things in context. Whereas translation out of context often encourages literal translation, translation inside a specific context makes the learner fully aware of the problems of single-word translations. The objective here was to use time effectively and economically while

making them understand that what works in their first language may not always work in English, and vice versa (see also Duff, 1989).

I also used the native language to provoke discussion and speculation, and to develop clarity and flexibility in thinking. It seems obvious that there is an inevitable interaction between the first language and the target language, occurring in any type of language acquisition. EFL teachers should not prevent such interaction from taking place, but rather encourage it where it serves a pedagogic purpose.

On occasion, I also noticed problems arising when the students were asked to do some fluency activities like discussion, role-play, dialogues, play acting, etc. Most of them were frustrated in not being able to communicate ideas adequately in English. At such points, I allowed them to use the limited English they had and praised their success in doing so. I refrained from any attempt at correction, as long as the core meaning was expressed. Here, I also used the strategies of simplification, paraphrasing and explanation, which proved rewarding.

Put together, the use of such strategies helped build the pupils' confidence, which is crucial to successful efforts at learning a language. As a result of this effort, they could write short stories and brief accounts of what they did. Among many other things, they produced the following as a group in one of the concluding classes: The group discussed a Telugu comedy programme that they had watched on TV a few days earlier. They wrote a play entitled "Habits Die Hard." Here is what they wrote:

Habits Die Hard[3]

Introduction: Once there was a director. He wanted to make a film but he had no money to make a film. He had no money to pay the actors and actresses. He saw a beggar on the road and he said.

(Director) Hello there. I am making a film and I want a hero in it. I want to make you the hero in my film. Please don't beg on the roads.

(Beggar) O.K, I won't beg on the roads because I want to become the hero in your film.

Next the director saw a panwalla rolling his pans.

Dierctor = Hello panwalla. I want a villain in my film. Please don't roll pans. I will make you a villain in my film.

Panwalla = I won't roll pans. I want to become a villain in your story.

Then the director saw a Lambadi girl (who had the habit of clapping all the time,) on the road and he said to her.

(Director) I want a heroine in my film. Can you act as the heroine of my film? But you must not clap on the roads.

Lambadi girl = Ok, sir. I am ready to act in your film.

Scene 2: And now the next day the director starts the film. The villain has kidnapped the heroine and hero is begging him to let the heroine go.

(Hero) Please leave my heroine alone, he asked by begging.

Villain = No, I won't let her go, says he while rolling a pan.

Heroine = let me go, let me go, says she by clapping her hands loudly.

The picture ran for 100 days. "

Conclusion

The experiment aimed to revive the students' interest in English and make them feel at ease with the language. A main objective was to get them over the state of fright and anxiety that the failure to progress in the language had created in them and encourage them to enjoy their English classes. All this exercise meant a measurable change in their attitude towards the learning of the language. Into the final few weeks of the experiment, the class always looked forward to the next class with more expectation than anxiety. The sharing of a story had an ice cone effect with a desire to lap it all up.

Five initiatives stand out and require further study and support. First, the narrative may hide some untapped keys to success. What every good grandparent does adequately, the teacher of English ought to do even better. What is needed is to use it well and make it suit the pupils' requirements. Second, the learner's native language has an immense potential not yet near fully realized or utilized, or even adequately grasped. To dub it as a mere source of errors or fossilized forms results in loss of economy and futility of much direct-method type of work. Third, group work—in pairs and in small groups—offers rich returns at the high school level and does not cause problems even at the primary stage as some studies (for example, Prabhu, 1987) have shown. Fourth, reformulation seems to work better where the teacher is a proficient non-native speaker—one who knows the learner's language and can put it to work to do meaning-based reformulation. Finally, opportunities for pupils to do things on their own, over a period of time, and individually, in pairs, and in small groups are important. Here, what also contributes to success are opportunities for expressing one's thoughts

without the teacher's intervention or attempts to correct them. The fewer the red-ink marks the greater may be the dividends.

Notes

[1] Satya Sai Baba, besides being a saint, is known for his achievements in reaching out to the needs of ordinary people in his state, Andhra. A recent noteworthy achievement is the provision of drinking water to about 700 villages.

[2] Freidlander's study provides support for L1 use in the planning of ESL writing when knowledge of the topic has been acquired in the first language. It also cites other studies reporting the beneficial effects using the L1 for L2 composing.

[3] A glossary for the non-English words contained here is found in Appendix B.

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Appendix A: (PowerPoint slides: refer to website)

Appendix B. Glossary of Non-English Terms Used

Pan: A preparation of spices wrapped up in a betel leaf highly popular in parts of India. It is often served as the last item of a meal.

Pan Wallah: Is a shopkeeper who roles and sells a pan.

Rishi/muni: A saintly person who spends most of his/her time in prayers

Lambadis: A tribal sect who live a nomadic life.

Asura: The opposite of a devta, who represents evil in mythological stories.