LIFTING SILENT VOICES THROUGH THE USE OF NARRATIVE IN EFL WRITING CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Although many people have identified the potential benefits of narratives, their use in academic world is not pervasive, and in some conditions questionable. My intention here is to provide a backdrop on the significance of narratives for the teaching of EFL writing. I will begin the paper by providing arguments on why narratives need to be integrated in the writing curriculum. This understanding is indeed crucial since there is still a shared belief among teachers and even students that narratives are not ‘academic and serious’. Thus, many teachers and curricula are reluctant to allocate a slot in their curriculum for narrative writing. The section that follows will describe the pedagogical benefits students will get from narratives. As there is no one perfect approach, pedagogical challenges of using narratives will also be examined. The paper will end with some considerations for teachers when using narratives in EFL contexts.

Key words: narrative, academic discourse, rhetorical distance, feedback

INTRODUCTION

The idea of writing this topic sprang from my personal narrative experience when I was a student and a junior teacher. During my university year in Indonesia, my teacher assigned me to write a personal narrative. I was so frustrated. I remembered staring at the blank page for days—not knowing what to write or how to start. Writing a narrative was particularly difficult because I have never been made accustomed to write such a genre in English, although oral narratives are part of the local culture. Personally speaking, I also found it hard to write about myself or family—knowing pretty

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well that whatever I wrote would be made public in the peer feedback session. The use of native-speaker model text was also not helpful. It made me feel inadequate in a way since I knew I could not produce such a perfect narrative. Despite the frustration, I did finish the assignment even though I felt it was bland; lack of strong emotional attachment commonly found in personal narratives.

I never thought that when I was a teacher I needed to deal with narratives again. As a teacher, I was in a slightly different position although not necessarily better. I felt the same discontentment, if not more, as when I was student. For one, I did not know how to teach narratives. Several questions came into my mind at that time, among others, how should I structure the class?; Should I ask the students to follow the model text?; What kind of topics should I assign students to write?; What kind of feedback should I give my students?; and Should I correct the content of students’ writings?.

I could see that most of my students experienced the same frustration that I felt as a student. As I expected, the result of their writings were not gripping. I could see that most of them wrote the story simply to complete the task and failed to develop personal attachment and voice in the story.

This condition has made me having mixed feelings about narratives. The readings that I have done on narratives show me potential benefits of narratives. I personally feel that narrative is the core of human life. Our humanity deepens through stories. Narratives are also known for their therapeutic powers (see Pennebaker, 1990; Tobin, 1997; and Moran, 2004). Thus, its use is particularly beneficial in Asian culture where sharing publicly about family problems and personal struggles tends to be perceived as inappropriate. Writing narratives can be a medium for students to explore aspects they might not be able to do in their home culture. Despite the powerful benefits of narratives, I feel without the appropriate teaching strategies all the benefits of narratives would just fall flat. Similar concern is also put forward by Fiestas and Pena (2004). This is the reason why I choose this topic.

My intention here is to provide a backdrop on the significance of narratives for the teaching EFL writing. I will begin the paper by providing arguments on why narratives need to be integrated in the writing curriculum. This understanding is indeed crucial since there is still a shared belief among teachers and even students that narratives are not ‘academic and serious’ and thus, not appropriate in academic settings. Consequently, many teachers and curricula are reluctant to allocate a slot in their curriculum for narrative writing. I will discuss the pedagogical benefits students will get from narratives. As there is no one perfect approach, pedagogical challenges
of using narratives will also be examined along with some tentative strategies to handle them. The paper will end with some considerations for teachers who want to use narratives in their EFL writing classes.

NARRATIVE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Narratives are the “the mother of all writing” (Murrah, 1996, p.77). Before learning to write other modes of writing, children usually write stories either about themselves or other characters. McCabe and Bliss (2003) stated that narratives are one of the fundamental discourse acquired early in all cultures and integral in all ages. This is different from expository genre learned through schooling.

As the mother of all writing, narratives can used as a bridge for other kinds of writing, including academic genres (see, among others, Soliday, 1994; Elbow, 2000; Pagnucci, 2004). Soliday (1994) suggests literacy narratives can help students to draw connection from students present writing competence to school worlds. From her research she found that reading and writing narratives help students to express how feeling different and pressure to cope has influenced their experiences. She believed that narratives will benefit both teachers and students because they can disclose “generative points of contact between the life and language of school and that of work, family, church, and so forth” (Soliday, 1994, p.270). For students, writing narratives can be a tool that provides connection between their everyday and academic lives. Teachers can also use student narratives to understand how students perceive academic life along with their needs, fear and expectations.

In some cultures, narratives are socialization tools to introduce children to values, assumptions and expected behavior preferred in a given society (see, among others, Paley, 1986; Peterson and McCabe, 1992; Pagnucci, 2004;). Parents socialize their children into membership in the culture by modeling the values and proper behavior through narratives. According to Paley (1986), sharing narratives through storytelling helps children to learn their roles in the society and how to interact appropriately with one another. While children’s stories may instill some stereotypical roles, it gives model of desired behavior. Our need for stories from such early age shows that the drive of narratives is, if not instinctive, quintessentially human (Pagnucci, 2004). I remember when I was a child, my mother often told me bedtime stories. They usually centered on moral values uphold in Indonesian society such as showing respect towards parents and/or elders and being patients in going through life ordeals. Although most of these stories represent an ideal-
istic view of human being and most often, unrealistic, I found they are really powerful. I felt that moral values frame through stories are more memorable than if they are taught explicitly.

Bruner (1996) believes that narratives are constructed as a mode of thinking. It represents the richness of human experiences. Narratives enable people to play an active role in constructing their own lives, seeking to make sense of their experiences by putting a sense of order on those experiences (Sarbin, 1986) and by seeing the self as constituted as a story (Bakhtin, 1981). Yet, Johnson and Golombek (2001) assert that narratives are not simply stories of individuals moving through and reflecting on experiences in isolation. They further explain that narratives naturally gain their meaning from people collective social histories. Consequently, they cannot be separated from the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts from which they emerged. Rather, they are deeply embedded in sociohistorical discourses and thus, reflect a “socially mediated view of experience” (Johnson and Golombek, 2001, p.5).

Narratives are believed to have healing powers (see, among others, Pennebaker, 1990; Tobin, 1997; McCabe and Bliss, 2003; Moran, 2004). Pennebaker (1990, p.30-34) pioneered a new interdisciplinary area called Writing and Healing. This writing movement integrates the disciplines of psychology, neuroscience and composition. He conducted an experimental study on the effect of narratives to the participants’ psychological dimensions. All of these participants were patients at his clinics. He divided the 46 participants into 4 groups and had them each write continuously for 15 minutes a day for four consecutive days. The control group was given a trivial topic to write about each day while the other three groups were told to write about a traumatic, painful or shameful experience. Within the three groups, the first group was instructed to describe their emotions and not the facts. The second group was assigned to describe only the facts of the experience and not the emotions. The third group was instructed to narrate the fact and describe their emotions.

The findings show that after four months, those in the group who had written about both their feelings and the facts concerning the painful experience revealed an overall improved mood and a more positive outlook. This improvement was not evident in the other three groups; those who had described only emotions and those who had described only facts. However, during the six months following the experiment there was a 50% drop in the visits for those who had written about feelings and facts while the rates were the same for the other three groups. From his study, it can be learnt that for most people, exploring in writing one’s feelings and thoughts about
a painful or shameful personal experience results in improved mental and physical health.

**NARRATIVE IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE**

Regardless some objections to its inclusion in academic world, it is encouraging to see that narrative inquiry has gained prominence as a research tool in English language teaching. The concept of narrative inquiry can be traced back to Dewey’s conceptualization of education (Dewey, 1916, 1933). He argues that humans are “all knowers who reflect on experience, confront the unknown, make sense of it, and take action” (Johnson and Golombek, 2001, p.4). Not all experiences are informative. For experience to be informative, people need to inquire into experience. This entails not only questioning immediate contexts but also drawing relations among experiences which Dewey called ‘continuity of experience’ (Dewey, 1938). In other words, ‘continuity of experience’ can be seen as a terministic screen to see how previous experience “change the conditions under which new experiences are understood so that person’s abilities, desires, and attitudes are changed” (Johnson and Golombek, 2001, p.4). According to Dewey (1938), this process of inquiry is educative since it enables us to reflect on our actions and then act with foresight. This process of inquiry is mostly achieved through stories (Johnson and Golombek, 2001).

**PEDAGOGICAL GAINS OF USING NARRATIVE IN THE EFL WRITING CLASS**

For students

Narrative is motivating. Who does not like to be given the authority to create their own world, pick characters they like, create their own problems and solutions? By doing so, students will develop emotional authority, attachments and investment in the stories they write. Writing personal narratives can also help students to make sense of their own experience (McCabe and Bliss, 2003).

Writing narratives enables students to import their home culture into the classroom (Corkery, 2005). EFL pedagogies sometimes make it hard for the students to talk about their L1 culture. To complicate the matter, the focus of educational pedagogies on L2 academic discourse has marginalized the home culture and experiences that students bring with them into the classroom. Thus, entering a classroom for these students is like entering a
foreign land. The pressure of making sense of the foreign world and words around them coupled with the expectation to survive and thrive in education, make the process of composition a complex one. All of these inner struggles need to be acknowledged in the EFL writing class. In such conditions, pedagogies should ideally relieve this inadequacy by making students see how their differences fit into the coursework (Corkery, 2005). The use of narratives in classroom enables students to import all of these significance experiences into the classroom. This view is summarized eloquently by Mutnick (1998) who stated that “[f]or students on the social margins, the opportunity to articulate a perspective in writing on their own life experience can be a bridge between their communities and the academy” (p.84 cited in Corkery 2005, p.51).

Another important benefit of narrative writing, pointed out by Soliday (1994), is its role in revising and strengthening students’ identities. Corkery (2005) highlights that writing classroom needs to be structured in such a way so that students can observe and experience each other’s narratives. This shared activity might lead to students’ reshaping their identities and suggest alternative ways to redefine oneself in the new community. In fact, Mutnick (1998) points out that student narrative are “... a potential source of knowledge about realities that are frequently misrepresented, diluted or altogether absent in mainstream depictions” (p.84). Mutnick’s idea highlights that all students, regardless their educational backgrounds, language competence, and ethnic groups can benefit from writing and reading narratives.

For those who might have unfavorable identities, narratives can provide a chance to adjust student self-image to adapt more comfortably in the new academic community. After all, as Corkery (2005) noted, students can alter how they want to be represented in the stories for their own benefit. As Rymes (2001) puts it

...[student stories are] not immutable theme that necessarily or interminably dominate their lives of these young men and women. Rather, these themes, by virtue of the context of their telling, were essential to these stories, and the students’ self-portrayals in these meetings. These portrayals, these lives, are always subject to change. (Rymes, 2001, p.39 cited in Corkery, 2005, p.51).

In making this comment, Rymes shows that narratives are a powerful means for students’ identities. This is because students can create the characters in their narratives. Most importantly, they can change these portrayals if they want to.

Narratives are helpful in increasing student cultural awareness. Soliday
(1994) states narratives can provide a medium for students from different cultures to view their experience with language as unique and special. She further explains that by “foregrounding their acquisition and use of language as strange and not a natural process, authors of literacy narratives have the opportunity to explore the profound cultural force language exerts in their everyday lives” (Soliday, 1994, p.511). In making this comment, Soliday asserts that narratives enable the writer to draw the connection between the effect of culture to language development.

For teachers

Narratives can provide a valuable diagnostic tool of students’ present communicative competence in the target language (Fiestas and Pena, 2004; Kang, 2005), particularly their grammatical competence. As narratives are a “… naturally bounded unit of discourse with regular internal structure” (McClure and Cadierno, 1993, p.209), they can be used as an effective tool to observe students’ grammatical competence. Different from grammatical exercise that assesses student discrete grammar skill in sentence-level discourse, narratives integrate students’ grammatical competence in extended discourse. When composing a narrative, students need to exercise their understanding in using, for example, idiomatic expressions (such as raining cats and dogs), regular and irregular verbs and tenses.

PEDAGOGICAL CHALLENGES OF USING NARRATIVES IN EFL CONTEXTS

Although narratives provide many educational benefits, the use of narratives is not without challenges. The most popular criticism directed to the use of narratives in academic setting, as stated in Tobin (1997), is they are not appropriate for academic expectation. Some considered personal narratives as being too easy because students have written autobiography in high school, and others think they are too difficult because students are too young to develop a perspective on their own lives. As for those who believe pedagogies need to be practical and prepared students for the workplace needs, narratives are perceived to have little to do with the kinds of writing needed in the workplace. Thus, many teachers and curricula are reluctant to allocate a slot in their curriculum for narrative writing.

Another challenge of using narratives in EFL contexts is the rhetorical distance of the L1 and L2. Several people have suggested that narratives are culture specific genre that varies from culture to culture and from one
discourse community to another (Bruner, 1996; Freeman, 1997; Hymes, 1974). Thus, children and adults from cultures who value lengthy narratives filled with background information about family members may find personal narratives from cultures who prefer brief narratives to be cold, while the latter find the narratives of the former beating around the bush. McCabe and Bliss (2003) mention that the way people tell a story in one language affects the way they tell a story in L2. Because of this, I personally feel teachers need to make the students familiar with how the rhetorical style of L2 is different from their L1.

Other than rhetorical distance, linguistic difference of L1 and L2 will also affect narrative composition in L2. According to Kang (2005), narrative production is very much regulated and limited by the availability of linguistic forms and rules in the language. An earlier study conducted by Berman and Slobin (2004, cited in Kang, 2005) showed how narrators are constrained by the availabilities of linguistic resources when selecting and arranging events in their narrations. Their research depicted that English- and German-speaking narrators displayed a dense style of encoding motion events by combining motion verbs with a rich set of locative participles available in their languages (e.g. “down from the cliff right into the water”). One studies focusing on the use of reference system shows that varied referential expressions are language-specific. Hickmann and her colleagues (1996, cited in Kang, 2005) did a contrastive analysis on English, French, German and Chinese. The result pointed out that cross-linguistic difference occurs. Nominal references are more frequent for the main third-person protagonist in Chinese and in English, but less frequent for the protagonist in French.

The fact that narratives are culture- and language- specific pose a teaching challenge to the way they are used in EFL contexts, in part because students tend to use their L1 rhetoric conventions when composing in the L2 (Fiestas and Pena, 2004; Kang, 2005). In her study of contrastive analysis between Korean and English, Kang (2005) mentions that EFL learners may rely on their L1 rhetoric discourse when producing narratives in L2. Specifically, learners will encounter difficulties in using linguistic means in L2 appropriately for those forms not available in L1. She found that only very advanced English learners of Korean were aware of the linguistic difference between the two languages. They were able to produce double subject constructions, a form present in Korean but not in English. When teaching narratives in EFL contexts, teachers need to bear these differences in mind. I personally think it will be helpful for students if teachers can make these differences explicit before assigning students to write narratives.
USING NARRATIVES IN L2 WRITING: SOME POTENTIAL QUESTIONS AND TENTATIVE SOLUTIONS

The use of model texts

Although the use of model texts in the writing classroom has been controversial, I personally feel that the benefits of model texts have been overlooked. Model texts can provide scaffolding for students’ own writing. This is especially true in many EFL countries where writing has not become part of the society. Corkery (2005) maintains that a narrative model text can show the techniques and structure, which students can later emulate when they write their own narratives. The study conducted by Sarah Michaels (1991) illustrated the benefits of teaching the narrative structures. She examined student narratives over the course of several days in a sixth-grade classroom. She looked at narratives that were written over the course of two separate assignments, one at the beginning of the school year and one at the end about visiting a circus.

Her findings showed that at the start of the year most students’ first drafts did not meet the teacher’s expectations for what makes a good story. In her view, a good narrative should have had a beginning specifying date, place, and the name of the circus to which the class had traveled. This information would make the narratives interpretable to readers who had not been on the trip. For the middle section of the narratives, the teacher expected students to describe and evaluated one particular circus act. Finally, she expected students to end their narratives with a return to the general, that is, giving an overview of the circus as a whole. By providing the structure of a narrative, Michaels (1991) contended that students produced a more structured narrative conform to the narrative schema the teacher had in mind. Although they did not refer to EFL writing per se, I feel that providing students will the structure of narratives will be helpful particularly if student rhetoric is (far) different from the target language rhetoric’s (for ideas of narrative structures see Murray, 1996 and Tickoo, 2001).

What topics are appropriate for narratives?

One simple, yet important, question is what kinds of topics should teacher assign students to write about? Although all people possess personal narratives, the ability to write them down is not inherent in students. When teachers just tell the students “Write about …”, they are often met with dead silence. This is especially true in EFL contexts, such as Indone-
sia, where written culture is not entrenched in the society. Fiestas and Pena (2004) assert that the topic of personal narratives will effect narrative performance.

In EFL contexts where students come from diverse backgrounds, narratives can be a media to explore the influence of difference and assimilation of students learning experience. Soliday (1997) suggests one topic appropriate for EFL teaching in multicultural settings. Based on her study on literacy narratives drawn from students at two different schools, she learnt that asking students to write about the cultural and linguistic struggle might be of interest for the students. One of her students wrote the experienced when learning French and English. He narrated that he never mastered proper French due to its grammatical complexity and resentment at having to use French at the expense of the language he always spoke at home (Creole). This was very different with his experience of learning English. He was quite surprised because he was able to learn it in a relatively short time. His narrative illustrates a complex and ongoing struggle between socially subordinate and dominant language that he has not fully resolved.

Selecting interesting topics are not sufficient. Most importantly, teachers need to frame the topic with appropriate pre-writing activities or contextual supports. Not all students are gifted to simply write narratives from memory. Pre-writing activities can help students to find ideas. Even if students have a point to make, some might not know how to develop it into a paragraph. Pre-writing activities, thus, can provide content for student narratives. Some pre-writing activities that I have tried out are using music, short stories, poems and pictures. In using these pre-writing activities, the challenge for teachers is to find the appropriate pre-writing activities for a particular topic and group of students. Fiestas and Pena (2004) point out that one pre-writing activity may be better suited than another to provide an optimal contextual support for a particular narrative.

Feedback in teaching narratives

So, what kind of feedback should students received in writing narratives? Elbow (2000) provides good insights on this. First, he recommends teacher not to provide any comments before reading the whole piece. By reading through students writing, teacher can choose which problems to focus on. Reflecting on his own experience, he stated that much of his bad comments were a result of jumping on giving marginal comments on something that turns out to be a minor issue. Second, when teacher returns stu-
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dents' writing, it might be helpful to spend five minutes or so and ask students to write a short notes describing what they can learn from the teacher feedback and how students would react to them. This simple activity is useful for teachers to assess if their feedback is unclear or when students misinterpret them or react in a way that teachers do not expect. Finally, most students will benefit when they feel that writing is a communicative media with a human being instead of merely an exercise of being right or wrong. Thus, teachers need to choose their comments selectively so that they “come from a human reader rather than from an impersonal machine or a magisterial, all-knowing God source” (p.359). Here are some feedback comments that Elbow suggests:

- Instead of saying “The organization is unclear here,” he says “I got confused by your organization here.”
- Instead of “unconvincing”, he uses “I’m unconvinced.”
- Instead of “Diction”, he prefers “Too slangy for me in this context.”

Elbow suggestions corroborate with Trimmer (1997). He reminds teachers that in giving feedback to students’ narratives, they need to bear in mind that they need to read students’ stories as a story. This means teachers should not read them by only diagnosing linguistic errors.

As a feedback provider, it is crucial that teachers strike a balance between their role as correctors of errors and their role as readers. The former involves a priori judgment based on, among other things, learners’ level of proficiency and general learning objectives, whereas the latter involves an ongoing assessment of how well learners cope with the developing classroom event (s). The challenge for teacher is to preserve students cultural communication style and enable them to use a narrative style that is expected in the target language at school.

When students have finished writing their narratives, Cook-Shatter (2003, p.111) advised teachers to create a forum in which students have the opportunity to “reflect on, evaluate and learn again from their work.” The process of reflection enables them to make sense of the experience they have had in writing narratives. While sharing each other’s narratives provides good media for collaborative learning, teachers need to do this with caution. This is particularly true with topics such as family problems, love lives, personal struggles and religious beliefs. Students might be embarrassed to share them with their friends.

CONCLUSION

One of the main theoretical and practical suggestions of this paper is
that writing narratives, if structured appropriately, provide a refreshing and lively change from other kinds of writing in the academic world. The use of narratives not only offers pedagogical benefits but also addresses the lack of attention given to the affective dimensions of the students. Despite the pedagogical benefits, EFL writing teachers need to pay attention to the challenges of using narratives such as the relative rhetorical distance of L1 and L2. Narratives also require teachers to organize the feedback session with caution especially if dealing with taboo topics as some students might be embarrassed to share their writing with their peers. After all, variety is the spice of life, which is also true in a writing class. Teachers need to experiment with different approaches in using narratives so that the writing class will be stimulating and motivating both for the students and the teacher.

REFERENCES


