

Creating a Narrative Arc for Business Communication Courses- Promoting Attention, Motivation, and Meaningfulness

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Abstract

The present study aims to highlight the usefulness of creating meaningful and memorable course for students by organizing its content in a narrative manner and by making use of stories and of narrative activities adapted to serve the educational needs of the course, with examples applied on a BE course structure. Combining narrative structures encourages students to use language in a dynamic form, to organize ideas and sequences in a logical order and to connect fragments of information in a natural manner. Narrating is part of our individuality, through it individual knowledge, personal reactions and professional experience are activated and offer a useful support for meaningful and memorable language practice.

Key words: narrative arc course, teaching BE, BE activities, students’ motivation, students’ attention
J.E.L. classification: Z13

1. Introduction

The present study started from personal observations that despite the generation gap, certain professors have a better impact on students. Through examination and reflection, I noticed that while I was more focused on teaching content and skills, other professors were more focused on telling. I was concerned with teaching vocabulary, grammar, reading, speaking, listening through the right type of activity, while they were more focused on telling stories, creating an emotional bond with students, making the courses memorable, by linking them to student’s immediate experience and to the surrounding world, offering them an insight into a new cultural, intercultural cross-cultural perspective.

By reviewing my teaching experience from the perspective of a philologist who teaches ESP, I noticed that most often it is even more important to first construct an individual narrative arc and then to be able to transpose this personal view into a course dedicated to students. Finding the relevant examples which support each other, which illustrate and give a general overall meaning to the entire structure is the most challenging issue. Instead of asking ourselves about the content to be covered in our courses, a change of perspective concerning what we want our students to learn from this course experience would open in front of our eyes a multitude of choices. From the multiple options available, finding the most relevant and those which can form a cohesive structure becomes more important.

From early childhood, we learn from stories. We are taught by our parents, educators, what is good or bad from stories, or how we should react or see the world. We later learn from other peoples’ stories and about what is right or wrong, when the right time comes, we reflect on our experiences and become creators and transmitters/narrators of stories concerning personal experiences. The use of stories in formal education can increase students’ interest in the course content, develop cultural awareness, improve knowledge on human relations, provide a bridge between studies and great existential questions and transform the whole educational process in a natural flow of information.

2. Theoretical background

Using a story in a class improves students’ recollection, emotional attachment, and sustained attention, it gives a general meaning of a complete learning process. Students in the narrative lecture condition rated the teacher higher and were more likely to enrol in another course taught by the instructor in the future. Moreover, when compared to students in the examples condition, students in the narrative condition showed more sustained attention to the lecture and did somewhat better on a short-term test. An extraneous information retention test corroborated students’ performance by enhancing student recollection of course content with more comprehensive information on the one hand and raising their total cognitive load on the other. (Kromka and Goodboy, 2018).

Traditionally a story arc or narrative arc, in a simplified version, is defined as a construction of plot in a novel or story, which includes episodic storytelling. Translating this structure in the academic world, any course is or can become a narrative arc which has an introductory part, assimilated to exposition, a climax, in which the peak of the arc is reached. The information provided in the course builds up to a core horn and reaches a point of maximum tension, and a dénouement, which wraps up the entire construct. By viewing the course as a cohesive structure which has *a fil rouge* similar to a *roman a tiroirs* (a novel made of drawers), in which the main narrative gives birth to a series of secondary narratives (similar to the matryoshka dolls principle), which may in turn give birth to other derived narratives, the information can be more effectively organised and motivate students to engage in an active learning process.

The syllabus components essentially comprise a list of items to be covered and the order in which they are presented, by managing to transform these into a narrative arc structure and introducing this arc to our students will provide more structure and meaning to them. For a more effective semester or a yearlong story course, a coherent narrative to guide the students through their learning experience, arouse their interest, captivate their attention and make more meaning to them coupled with a backward method of planning is suggested (Oswald K., 2022). In addition, another basic consideration is starting from the discourse learners will need, which needs to be suitable to the workplace context (Frendo E., 34). As Frendo noticed, it is often difficult to precisely name the structures and the communication skills, for example, how much should a “learning about” include? How do we quantify “an understanding”? (Frendo, 35) Setting the course objectives is another requirement, most BE courses aim performance and training objectives, what the student is expected to do and to what standard. A valuable tool is offered by students themselves if we ask them to define and write their own objectives. A common problem of courses today is regular attendance, as for various reasons many students today do not attend courses regularly. This can affect the overall impact of the course, some of the activities, the entire “narrative” of the course, or the project work proposed.

A reversed course structure which starts from the final point of the academic journey, the point which is a natural course for learning, considering that from early age children are thought through narrative techniques. When instructors utilised course related almost palpable and easy to remember stories, students’ cognitive engagement raised, by increasing their attention and perceptions on structuring and integrating the content (Bolkan S., 2021). Studies in L2 students using Digital Story Telling in their narratives indicated an improvement in terms of being more aware of personal feelings and the audience’s presence and providing more details to the story. Furthermore, the availability of numerous ways of communication was discovered to broaden their story subjects and more forcefully evoke their experiences and visions (Kim and Lee, 2018).

Narrowing our discussion, business narratives are part of a professional ecosystem of stories which tell people stories about success or failure, teaching people how they could fit in the world, fuelling people's dreams and paving the way or explaining the failure. In the business world stories are intended to market, to sell, to train or to teach. The types of narratives to be used specific to the field of business: career narratives, professional narratives, industry narratives, organisational narratives, product/service narratives, cause narratives, creation narratives. A wide range of business studies underline the possibilities of using design narratives for organisational purposes, such as sensemaking, corporate strategy tools, as well as entrepreneurial identity and legitimacy building (Hakayama et al., 2021)

Various structures connected to narratives reflect this attitude: *a tall story, a Cinderella story, don't let the facts get in the way of a good story, get the story right, same old story, end of story, a fishy, a long story, to make up a story*. The linguistic structures detail our complex relationship with stories. They can be very personal, invented, misleading, old, surprising, similar to well-known stories, scary, honest, different, two sided, nonsensical. Even some idioms and phrases have a story of their own (cost the arm and leg, pull someone's leg, be caught red handed, break the ice), the ways of teaching and exploiting them through vocabulary, grammar, speaking, writing complex activities. Apart from transferring personal information, storytelling enriches vocabulary, grammar, self-assessment (guided through self-assessment checklists), narrator's perspective, critical thinking, imagination etc. Storytelling is a form of therapy which guides people towards exploring fundamental aspects of their own internal architecture, discovering and becoming aware of their strengths, values, beliefs, self-compassion etc.

3. Research methodology

The narrative arc structure can span on one semester, two semesters or in the case of other courses, lasting two to three years of study. The research methodology includes a lengthy process of regularly asking students to write their thoughts, learning techniques, newly discovered vocabulary or structures and organising them in a personal autobiographical portfolio which creates for them a palpable sense of progression and anchor in time. They can retrospectively visualise their journey through learning and nurture their motivation to pursue their studies.

The course is organised as a *roman a tiroir*, with a main story-a semester long story that highlights the most important course elements, a cohesive narrative to be developed that accompanies like a fil d'Ariadne the student, in which the tiny pieces of individual stories will fit, most often by themselves, into their places. Students will enjoy making the course interactive by bringing their own examples and experiences. The attitude of the teacher should be *I'm here to weave a story with you*.

Applying metacognition by guiding students to reflect on what they could acquire during the lesson and how they could use that in their ordinary life such as negotiating skills, presentation techniques, networking, socialising skills, intercultural skills. As learning in faculty is for their entire life and for the world beyond, therefore, teaching higher-order skills needs to be prioritised, whether we talk about learning how to work in teams and how to collaborate, sympathising or extracting a rule from examples or finding suitable examples to illustrate a theoretical approach, managing a project or developing market research.

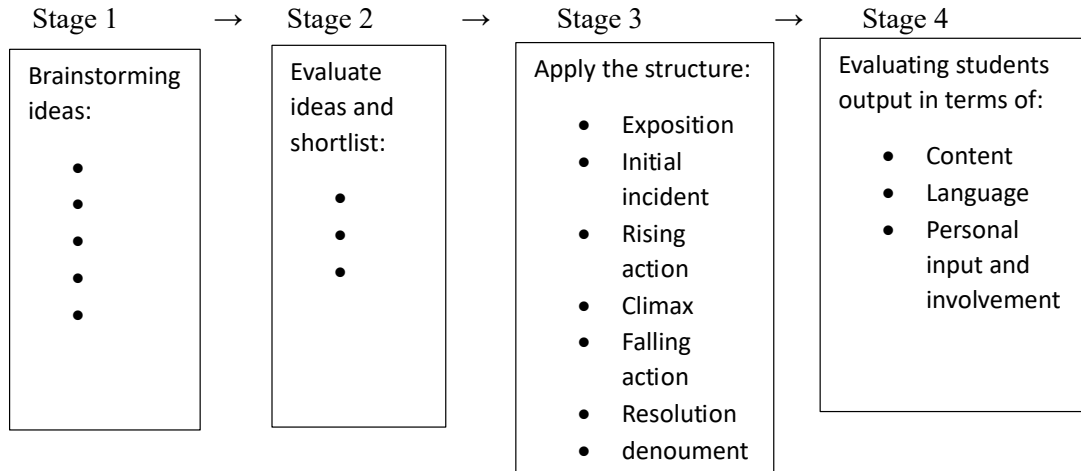
4. Findings

In order to allow students to provide a context in which to include their own experience, with numerous advantages in terms of attention, motivation, easiness to remember and to construct meaning around concepts, linking concepts to other pre-existent acquisitions, we suggest the use of framework materials which allow the learner to produce narrative content and narrative context directly applicable to their own experience as an extremely rewarding type of practice. Even in the case of limited language knowledge, the activity itself brings a plus of value to the course. Such activities are suitable for individual, pairs or groups of learners which can be challenged to produce their own materials in different circumstances. When delays or structural mistakes occur, most often they are due to poor organisation once the organisational skills are activated. The foreseen problems are minimised or disappear. Framework narratives offer a good support for hesitant learners in terms of organising their ideas, language, organisational and team spirit. They do not dictate the exact words or structures to be used in the task, but they offer support and suggestions and once the task is accomplished, the level of satisfaction of the students involved increases.

Framework narratives can serve different purposes and can be used in developing an analysis, describing a contrast, a structure, a similarity, commenting with personal arguments, describe a sequence of events and their possible causes and effects.

Suggestions of such activities which can be used for various types of courses and can be modified to serve multiple educational purposes, can be based on the following structures:

A.



B.

A customer-supplier story:

Stage 1 → discuss and decide on a problem/story/request which forms the core of the narrative.

Stage 2 → present the narrative (as an individual, pair or group production).

Stage 3 → evaluate the narrative according to a grid (suggest areas of improvement, highlight the positive outcomes).

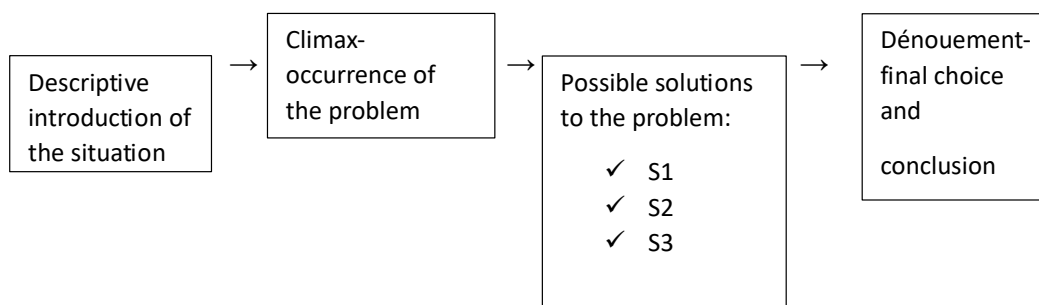
C.

Production stage description under the form of a flowchart or a web chart:

stage 1 → flowchart completion

stage 2 → narrative of the process

D. problem-solving narrative:



E.

Roll-and-write a story activity can be based on the following structure:

Stage 1	- roll a setting – Where? -When? -roll a character-Who? -roll a plot- Why?
Stage 2	In pairs or groups students make their choices from stage 1 output
Stage 3	Produce stories
Stage 4	Evaluation of the activity

F. Roll-and-write in pieces- using a folded paper on which each member of the group writes a paragraph, respecting the given structure below:

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| -exposition | -falling action |
| -initial incident | -resolution |
| -rising action | -dénouement |
| -climax | |

The advantages of the method include: a low input from the trainer is required for the student to begin production because the frames offered may be placed on any support and include many shapes and combinations of different frames. Students are encouraged to be creative, to focus on the message, and to organise ideas and language structures in a personal and adaptable manner. These forms of practises are easily adaptable to the requirements and capabilities of learners, allowing students of all levels to communicate their experiences while also inspiring them to learn from the other members of the group and expand their knowledge. Students have the opportunity to learn from one another and work in pairs or groups. Activities can serve as an interactive teaching and diagnostic tool when assessment grids are used. They can be easily modified and keep students alert, motivated, and attentive, deeply engaged in the activity that contains language practise and activates experience relevant to their needs and expectations, because of their flexibility, which allows a multitude of combinations and input to be brought instantly into action, and because of the high degree of unpredictability of the production.

5. Conclusions

Authentic fragments or pieces of materials (such as advertisements, articles, personal stories, pictures, charts, timetables, bus tickets, annual reports, company narratives, menus, minutes of meetings, brochures) as well as created structures can be exploited and efficiently used. Frame narrative activities are particularly relevant for a great variety of purposes, they offer an infinite number and possibilities to combine, through their dynamic and creative, as well as unexpected output, changing from one student to another, they keep the course alert, students deeply involved and attentive, motivated and willing to contribute or offer support to colleagues in need.

Offering students the opportunity to teach us will make them feel empowered and will reward us with valuable suggestions and transform learning in a memorable experience. We will thus transform them into our co-learners and we will prove them that we are also there to learn from them, for them and with them. Students feel encouraged to transfer the knowledge required in the classroom to their everyday lives, communities or future careers.

Such activities offer a complex support for meaningful practice based on individual knowledge, personal reactions and professional experience. However, they are limited in terms of possibilities to stop the activity, to offer personalized methodical support based on thorough explanations, these forms of practice cannot replace materials especially designed to explain and exemplify structures. From the students' point of view, they will always benefit and be more enjoyable to certain types of learners than to some others. An overuse of these frames will tire the learners. From personal experience, we consider that they take more time than other more targeted types of activities. Even

if the initial input of the instructor is reduced, during the activity the narrative development stage requires a better monitoring of the group of learners and a continuous support from the instructor, a constant physical and mental connection to each participant and to all at the same time.

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