

Interactive Narration in the ESL Classroom

Alfredo Lo Giudice, Manhattanville College

A growing awareness in recent years of the psycho-social aspects of language use and language learning (Stevick 1976a; pp. 103-24) has led to a keener appreciation among language teachers of the importance of involving the total personality of the learner in the language acquisition process. This realization underlies many current efforts to make the language learning experience more meaningful, interesting and efficient. Such learner-centered approaches seek to engage the learner in purposeful activities with others in the language classroom by providing opportunities for using language as it might be encountered in non-classroom settings. Thus, communicative purpose and function, formerly overlooked, have become important determinants of humanistic syllabus design.

An activity exemplifying these ideas, and one which I have found both satisfying and effective with groups of adult ESL learners can be referred to as "interactive narration" since it entails the sharing of stories. One advantage of this technique is that it encompasses, in reality, a constellation of procedural variations, thus making it adaptable to multiple proficiency levels. The teacher can easily regulate the degree of difficulty of the activity to fit the needs of his or her learners by making appropriate adjustments in such variables as: text-type provided, linguistic and cultural complexity, media used to convey the narratives initially, amount of teacher

assistance offered during the preparation phase, and time allotted for completion of the activity.

I will describe two possible applications of an interactive narration technique in its three phases: preparation, transmission, and feedback.

Version I

The teacher prepares two different narratives (A and B) of appropriate complexity for the group.¹ For maximum interest, the narratives should be humorous anecdotes, extended jokes, or stories containing an ironic twist. Plot complications may be introduced at more advanced levels. For each story, a series of pictures sequentially depicting the events described in the text is also provided. Pictures and text are aligned vertically side by side down the page; the pictures are placed on the left half and the text on the right half of the page. About an inch or so to the right of each picture is written only the language referring to that picture. Thus, the text will not exhibit paragraph form but rather appear spaced. The text and picture sequence are placed this way on the page so that they can be separated visually from each other by folding the page vertically. This will enable the pictures to act as visual prompts in step five below.

Classroom procedure is as follows:

1. The class is divided into an even number of small groups (2-4 students

each). For purposes of illustration, let us assume a class size of twelve—four groups (A₁, A₂, B₁, B₂) of three students each.

2. One member of each group is designated as its leader and is asked to accompany the teacher to another room or area beyond earshot of the other students, who are given an unrelated activity to do while leaders work on their narratives. Hence, four students would in this example be involved in the preparation phase of this activity.
3. Leaders of A₁ and A₂ are paired together and each given a copy of narrative A; leaders of B₁ and B₂ are paired together and each given a copy of narrative B. During this preparation phase, the A₁-A₂ dyad work together on narrative A only, while the B₁-B₂ dyad do the same with narrative B. Since the maintenance of an information gap is essential at this stage of the activity, members of the A₁-A₂ dyad should not be permitted any familiarity with narrative B, nor should members of the B₁-B₂ dyad be allowed to become acquainted with narrative A. To discourage any possible eavesdropping, the dyads should be seated as far apart as possible.
4. The leaders read their stories for comprehension. They clarify any questions they may have regarding vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation with each other or with the teacher.
5. Leaders working together on the same story practice trying to reproduce it orally to each other. After a few minutes, they are asked to fold their papers lengthwise so that only the pictures remain visible. Using the pictures only as prompts, they practice retelling the story as completely as possible.
6. The teacher collects the papers. Leaders are now instructed to practice retelling the stories from memory. When they are able to recount the stories satisfactorily, the preparation phase is completed.
7. Leaders return to the classroom and to their original groups. The transmission phase begins.
8. Each group leader tells the story to his or her group. (For groups of beginners, the teacher may simplify the retelling task by using two leaders instead of one for each group, a variation which would allow leaders to assist each other in recounting the story or permit the group to listen to two complete retellings, one by each leader.) During this stage, students will ask questions about context or vocabulary, which the leaders will have to clarify.
9. After listening to the narratives, group members attempt to recount them to leaders as a check for comprehension and completeness.
10. Leaders of all groups then exchange places so that they are with students who have just heard the story which is as yet unknown to the leaders. Hence, leaders of A₁, A₂, B₁, and B₂ will be seated with those who have

received the stories in groups B₁, B₂, A₁ and A₂ respectively.

11. Recipients of A₁ and A₂ now retell the story recounted to them to the leaders of B₁ and B₂; recipients of B₁ and B₂ do the same with leaders of A₁ and A₂. The leaders listen to this second-hand retelling of the stories which are "new" to them.
12. Once all the leaders have understood all the "new" stories, they are asked to retell them to the entire class. One of the original tellers of story A tells story B. Then, one of the original tellers of story B tells story A. This begins the feedback phase.
13. Original leaders determine the accuracy and completeness of the transferred narratives, making any necessary additions or corrections regarding content.
14. A discussion ensues with respect to where and how the communicative process may have broken down.

Version II

The version just described represents a relatively controlled application of interactive narration. Having learners work with a given piece of language makes fewer encoding demands on them while allowing practice with specific linguistic items. However, the activity can be made freer and more challenging especially for advanced groups if the teacher provides a framework within which learners are encouraged to generate their own language.

In this second version, the teacher prepares sequences without accompanying

text for two different narratives (A and B). Each sequence should contain about six pictures or drawings. A short list of vocabulary items, useful grammatical structures, and a series of comprehension questions (fact and inference-type) can be supplied if greater support for the activity is desired. The procedure is as follows:

1. The picture sequences are cut up into individual frames.
2. Students are divided into an even number of groups of six members each. To illustrate, we will assume two groups. One group will work with narrative A and the other with narrative B.
3. The cut-up pictures of each sequence are distributed in random order to members of the groups so that each learner has only one picture of his or her group's story sequence.
4. Without looking at each other's pictures, the member of each group attempt to reconstruct orally the original story sequence. This is the well-known strip story technique as applied to pictures.
5. After students think they have correctly reconstructed the sequences, they place the pictures on a table in the determined order. Discussion of the now-visible constructed sequences continues.
6. The teacher distributes the photocopied original sequences of stories A and B to groups A and B respectively. Students check their solutions against these original sequences.

7. In pairs, students answer any comprehension questions provided on the handout to assure that they take note of important aspects of the story line.
8. Students then practice telling the story with the help, if necessary, of the vocabulary and structure notes provided on the sheets. The teacher circulates, giving assistance where needed.
9. Half of the members of each group exchange places with one another so that each group is equally composed of learners with different stories to tell.
10. Students share their stories orally.
11. A student from each group is selected to recount to the class the story he or she has just been told.
12. The class compares how closely the retold narrative corresponds to the original. Discussion of where breakdown in transmission might have occurred follows.
13. Next, the teacher places a large number of disparate objects on a table within view of the entire class.
14. In pairs, students decide on three or four of these objects to use in jointly creating an original story in which the objects are somehow connected. This, of course, entails the use of language for imaginative, and often, very humorous purposes.
15. Students circulate around the room, orally sharing their stories with one another.
16. As a composition exercise, the pairs are asked to write out their narrative. The written work can later be used as the basis for an error correction exercise, or as part of a writing lesson on the rhetoric of narration. Many other follow-up activities are also possible (Wyman 1983: 5-6).

Benefits

Interactive narration offers a flexible communicative framework for practicing listening and speaking skills. It can be used as a tool to help develop the learner's ability to process and produce pieces of discourse longer than the sentence.

While its usefulness for work with reported speech and temporal discourse markers is readily apparent, it is not limited to these teaching points. Because teachers are free to select narratives according to their grammatical and lexical content, interactive narration can be utilized to practice a wide variety of structures and vocabulary. Moreover, it affords the learner opportunities to engage in a number of specifically definable speech acts such as organizing and reporting events in chronological sequence, paraphrasing, and requesting and providing clarification about the details of events. Finally, it has the advantages of any group activity—by moving the teacher into a facilitator role, it increases participation and encourages risk-taking, peer teaching and learner autonomy.

The shortcomings of linear, teacher-centered approaches to language teaching

have become all too apparent to adult ESL teachers who must cope with problems posed by continuous enrollment, mixed-level groupings and learner alienation (Stevick 1976b) while remaining cognizant of the special needs of the adult learner. Part of the answer to these challenges may be for teachers to use activities such as interactive narration to create an environment for acquisition (Krashen 1977, 1981, 1985), one from which all learners can take something, and one to which they can all contribute.

Note

1. For a description of a storytelling procedure paralleling this version in some respects but logistically somewhat less complex, see Wyman (1983) who explains how a single story might be used with pairs of students.

References

- Krashen, S. (1977). The monitor model for adult second language performance. In M. Burt, H. Dulay, and M. Finocchiaro (Eds.), *Viewpoints on English as a Second Language*. (pp. 152-161) New York: Regents Publishing Company.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis*. London: Longman.
- Stevick, E. (1976a). *Memory, meaning and method*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Stevick, E. (1976b). English as an alien language. In J. Fanselow and R. Crymes (Eds.), *On TESOL 76*. Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Wyman, E. D. (1983). Storytelling: Unexpected returns from a forgotten resource. *TESL Reporter*, 16, 3-6.
- Krashen, S. (1977). The monitor model for adult second language performance.