

HOW TO TEACH NARRATIVE IN THE CLASSROOM

I. Introduction

These days, the necessity of diversifying how to teach English is being required in the field of English education in Japan. Especially, the most important focus is on bringing up learners' communicative competence, which highlights the significance of communication activities in classes. Meanwhile, classes for teaching English are also considered to be one of the most important subject by which the students can be assisted as to their entrance examination. In high schools, especially, the entrance examination is highly important for both students and teachers, so English teachers in high schools cannot help taking it into consideration when they teach English in classes. It is hard for teachers to integrate tasks for communicative competence and skills for the entrance examination into one English class; traditional grammar-translation methods and communication activities cannot be synthesized easily. Therefore, the field of teaching English faces in fact, a dilemma between the traditional approach and the burgeoning one.

Such a situation makes the field of teaching English more difficult to introduce literature or narrative into English classes in high school.

In textbooks used in high schools class in Japan, narrative or literature does not occupy a dominant place: some textbooks contain a few narrative tasks in them; others include no narrative materials. This fact well demonstrates that currently, in fact, there are few opportunities for students to experience reading narrative in classes in high schools. Haruo Erikawa expresses apprehensive about the situation in which the opportunities for reading narrative decrease (*The English Teachers' Magazine* 15). The fact that literature and narrative—one of the most authentic materials—are not used aptly in English classes is problematic.

Even in such cases, however, narrative can play significant roles. Yoshifumi Saito states that literature is the best way for teaching English (*The English Teachers' Magazine* 6). Actually, it brings a number of benefits to the field of teaching English. First, narrative can enhance learners' motivation due to their authenticity; reading English narrative is one of the most authentic tasks in relating to English. Masaru Yasuda shows that most students hope literature to be dealt with in English classes (187). Second, narrative can develop learners' ability to think. Inference plays significant roles in fostering it. Takeo Tanaka et al. mention in their book the significance of the ability to infer in reading texts (16). Third, narrative can raise their international understanding. Through reading narrative, learners experience not only reading the discourse but also encountering various cultures and the

differences of them from their own cultures. Using literature which is rich in cultural and historical contents lets them be aware of international viewpoints.

This thesis seeks to explore the method of using narrative in teaching English in high school classroom in Japan. In the stream from the traditional grammar-translation methods to ones for communicative competence, the purpose of this thesis is to bring an approach from a different aspect into the field of teaching English by utilizing literature. This practice will draw possibilities of using literature in teaching English in classroom.

II. Use of Literature in Classroom

1. Present Situation in English Classroom in High Schools in Japan

First of all, it is indispensable to look at the present situation of teaching English with literature in high schools in Japan. This thesis deals with and analyzes four authorized textbooks, actually used in some high schools in Japan: *Mainstream English Communication I*, *Mainstream English Communication II*, *Elements English Communication I*, and *Big Dipper Reading Course*. They contain some narrative tasks in themselves. Each text has some questions in it asking the contents or eliciting students' ability to infer. In the next section, the narrative materials in each textbook are analyzed in detail.

2. Analysis on the narrative tasks in the textbooks

2.1. *Mainstream English Communication I*

In *Mainstream English Communication I*, three narrative tasks are included: *Roman Holiday*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and “The Fall of Freddie the Leaf.” *Roman Holiday* is a famous and popular movie. A slight part and its scripts of the movie are quoted and listed in the textbook. The use of a famous and popular work as a material in a class is expected to raise learners’ motivation toward reading the text and learning English. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is a juvenile literature, written by Roald Dahl in 2005. This story is also made into a movie, which shows and becomes popular in Japan. “The Fall of Freddie the Leaf” is a short story by Leo Buscaglia, published in 1982. The whole story of the narrative is placed in the textbook, so learners can read and comprehend the entire contents, reading the textbook. It is beneficial for learners to complete in reading one narrative material, and it can lead to a good opportunity to raise their motivation and interest in reading English.

One assumed issue in the narratives, in using materials in classroom, is the quality of the questions put at the final page of each narrative. All of the questions are inferential questions. In *Roman Holiday*, for example, the questions listed below the story are as follows: “How has Ann changed after she met Joe?” and “How has Joe changed after he met Ann?” (65). These questions look difficult for high school

students to consider and answer correctly, thinking that they can read the text just one time or two. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the question is “What will happen to Charlie?” (131). This question seems too abstract to ponder appropriately. The quality of the questions employed in the textbook seems hard for high school students.

2.2. *Mainstream English Communication II*

In *Mainstream English Course II*, there are three narrative tasks utilized: Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Lucy Maud Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*, and Kenko Yoshida’s *Tsurezuregusa*, translated from Japanese into English. “The Adventure of Tom Sawyer” is a famous narrative, published in the United States. The fact seems to well motivate students to face the text. “Anne of Green Gables” is also a famous work, a children’s literature published in Canada. This narrative has been translated into Japanese many times, so there are a lot of readers of it in Japan. *Tsurezuregusa* is a famous Japanese essay, a part of which, in the textbook, is translated into English and used as a text. As Yoshifumi Saito states that there are some merits in reading a Japanese literature in English, in that students can foster their own understanding and gain new perspectives on the work (*The English Teachers’ Magazine* 38), this narrative can provide them a suitable opportunity to be in their own culture.

One assumed challenge, as with the case of *Mainstream English Communication I*, also lies in the quality of the questions attached to

each narrative. The question related to “Anne of Green Gables,” for example, asks, “What is a lesson you have learned from your failure?” (139). It is true that encouraging students to think about themselves is successful and that this question itself has no problem. The problem is, however, the fact that there is no fact-finding questions in this part. Students have to think about, before tackling the questions asking themselves, questions asking about the contents of the text.

2.3. *Elements English Communication I*

There are two narrative tasks included in *Elements English Communication I: Once upon a Home upon a Home* by Kunio Kato and Kenya Hirata, and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. The former narrative is a story which has become text from an animated film. It may be useful to show the film to students before or after reading the text. The latter narrative is a famous novel published in Britain in 1726. The text used in the textbook is a revised version for extensive reading by Penguin Books. The narrative is one of the most classical novels written in prose in Britain, so reading the text provides learners with a good experience of encountering a work different from their situation both in time and culture.

The quality of the questions listed in *Once upon a Home upon a Home* are contrary to those in the textbooks above; there are questions only confirming students’ comprehension of the text. At the end of the narrative are asked two kinds of questions, both of which ask about the

contents of the narrative: one asks questions concerning the detail, giving them three options in each; the other asks them to fill in the blank with true or false, according with whether it is mentioned in the text or not. As stated by Takeo Tanaka, et al., making students just comprehend the contents of the text is not enough to let them understand the real value of reading narrative; rather, the key point in teaching narrative is to make them, through the superficial expressions, grasp what is hidden behind the text, such as the emotions of the characters or the main theme of the narrative (52). Thus, the suggestion here is to add some inferential or evaluative questions to them. It would be more appropriate list of questions.

Gulliver's Travels, on the other hand, offers reasonable quality of questions. The question part consists of fact-finding questions, inferential questions and evaluative questions. The set of three questions corresponds to the classification of questions proposed by Takeo Tanaka et al. (13). This set of questions can encourage students both to comprehend the contents of the text and to consider it independently.

2.4. *Big Dipper Reading Course*

In *Big Dipper Reading Course*, two types of narrative are included: story and essay. As a story, Corey Kilgannon's "Ending the Silence" is used in the textbook. The story is about the life of a woman who got deaf because of the bomb in World War II. Over 50 years after she had become

deaf, she underwent a surgery, which enabled her to hear again. As an essay, Bill Bryson's "Rule Number 1: Follow All Rules" is utilized. This story is a description of an event by the author, essayist who has lived both in Britain and the United States, developed by his first-person narrative.

In the middle and at the end of the stories, some questions are equipped. The quality of the questions are quite good because at first, the text offers fact-finding questions, such as "How did Hermine understand what others say?" (125). Then, it offers questions confirming students' comprehension of the narrative: questions asking them to answer what happens in the story; those asking them to answer with true or false. Finally, each section offers an opportunity to express their own opinions concerning the stories: for the former story, for example, the textbook asks, "What would you tell Hermine at the hospital room if you were her son or daughter?" (129). The narrative parts of this textbook are well composed because they contain fact-finding questions and one evaluative question for students to answer after reading the narratives.

One assumed issue is the fact that all of the questions attached to the sections are written in Japanese. If the students who are expected to use the textbook are estimated as lower-ability learners, this kind of questions, which use just Japanese, will function. However, in the case of using it for advanced learners, it may well cause them to get bored in

reading narratives and answering questions. The situation of the schools or learners' condition must be considered in using the sections.

2.5. The discussion on analysis of the textbooks

The narrative materials used in the textbooks are generally dealt with just as side tasks, namely, they are paid attention to in less important ways. The focus is not on grammar or expression but on the story itself. In that respect, the narrative materials look independent among other parts. The quality of the questions attached to the narratives alter depending on the textbooks themselves. The next section will plan a class teaching narrative, utilizing advantages of each textbook.

III. A Plan of a Class Using a Narrative Material

This section seeks to propose a potential of using a narrative material in an English class for high school students in Japan. This class uses *Element English Communication I* as a textbook. The target learners of this class are first-year students of high schools who learn in a public high schools in Japan. This class is conducted in January, in the latter part of their terms as first graders.

In the class, the Lesson 9 of the textbook, *Gulliver's Travels* (107-17), is utilized. The story is originally a full-length novels, but it is shortened in this textbook, as a material for rapid reading, so that

students can read it with relatively short time and less energy. The text develops with the first-person narrative by Lemuel Gulliver, who travels four different places in the story, each of which forms a part: Part 1 is about the travel to Lilliput, in which all of the people living are small human beings; Part 2 deals with his staying in Laputa, an island flying in the air; Part 3 discloses incidents he experiences in Japan, where he encounters a ceremony called *fumie*; and Part 4 is about a country ruled by horses, which influence his way of thinking during and after the travel. In this class, this story is also used as a text for rapid reading.

There are three goals in this class. The first goal is that the students can read a narrative written in English. As they are not accustomed to reading stories in English, this class seems a little hard for them. The sense of achievement, however, of reading through one narrative will give them confidence in reading English. The second goal is that they can think about the emotions of the characters or the theme of the narrative. This goal is assisted by inferential questions as a scaffolding. The third goal, and the most important aim, is that they can express what they feel when they read the story. They must have opportunity to express their own ways of thinking about the text.

The procedure of the class is briefly described in this paragraph. As an introduction, the information concerning the original novel, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, is concisely explained. Then, the students get worksheets, on which they work in pairs. In her practice,

Maki Okumura shows that reading and discussing a story with others can give them a sense of achievement in reading an English text (29). This study integrates her theory in the main activity of the class. They read each Part, divided by the textbook, between which they work on the questions listed in the worksheets with partners. Before reading a Part, they have time to glimpse the questions attached to the part, so that they can read the text with some foresight knowledge, which promotes their skimming. At last, after reading the whole text and answering the questions attached to each part, they are given opportunities to express how they think about the narrative. The final question asks “Imagine that you are Gulliver. How did you feel after the travels?” and lets them talk with partners about this question. Some of them have a brief presentation about the answer to the question. They can discuss and present their own opinions in Japanese, because it would be too tough for them if they were forced to speak in English, taking it into consideration that they had little time to experience this narrative. The class finishes, with the worksheets being collected.

IV. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the potential for narrative in the field of teaching English in high school in Japan. This study, using Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* in *Element English Communication I*, created a brief teaching plan which can motivate learners toward English. The

point the most major focus was put is the quality of questions: questions must elicit opinions of each student, so not only ask about the contents but also ask them to infer and evaluate through the text. These questions can make it possible for them to have opinions about the narrative as well as to comprehend the story itself. Besides, in this class, learners read the text and answer the questions in pairs, which can assist their reading the narrative with more ease. This thesis presents the plan of the class as a proposal for the field of teaching English in high schools in Japan. I wish this plan will be useful for a future study or survey in teaching narrative in English classes in high schools.

V. References

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