
Narrative Construction in Interlanguage and Fostering Critical Thinking

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Abstract

This paper intends to share with practicing English language teachers a case study which shows that EFL learners of Arabic background who still show interlanguage features in writing can perform narrative construction tasks showing evidence of critical thinking. It follows the approach of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) which has two fundamental principles. One, the classroom-based investigation should direct pedagogy in a meaningful way, and the two, the findings of the investigation should enhance the learning experience of the learner. An examination of 25 texts constructed by the learners shows that while constructing and furthering short narratives, they are able to give evidence of the ability to sequence events and to interrelate problems with creative solutions. The samples also demonstrate cohesion and coherence which are outcomes of critical thinking. The primary implication of this research is to ensure that one of the types of tasks that EFL teachers can give their learners to exercise their critical thinking skills is narrative construction task, which the learners can handle independently despite poor accuracy skills. The EFL teachers can plan their courses with scope for narratives for reading and writing. In-class writing exercises can be encouraged for both teachers and students. Students who have low self-esteem due to their poor grammar experience a positive learning and performance experience which add to their intrinsic motivation. This is important for the internal sociology of the classroom. The task of construction of narratives by understanding the internal aspects of narratives leads to critical thinking skill that is developed along with language proficiency.

Keywords: Narrative Construction, Critical Thinking, Interlanguage

Introduction

While accepting the diversity in the theory and practice of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) one clearly understands two minimal aspects of consent. The first one is that the classroom-based research can improve the teacher's pedagogical content knowledge and the second one is that it can enhance the students' learning experience (Almeida 2010). Keeping these two aspects in mind, this paper describes a classroom-based investigation of whether first year undergraduate EFL learners of Arabic background can be challenged with a cognitively demanding task requiring them to think critically while it is accepted that their grammatical accuracy is still in its formative stage. Leaders of educational philosophy and curriculum planners insist upon the development of critical thinking skills but it is hardly the fact that in a language programme, a course or a module is dedicated entirely to critical thinking skills. Because of the abstractness of their very ontology, critical thinking skills are mostly combined with or integrated into other skill-based activities which are more tangible, such as reading and writing. Pending a longer debate, this paper explores how critical thinking skills can be nurtured and developed through apparently simple acts of creativity in writing in short narrative constructions as part of a guided writing task. Zabihi and Rezazadeh (2012) identified the genre of narrative as one of the areas where the study of creativity can provide fruitful implications. In language learning, narrative tasks are a frequently studied and well-established task type where due to their open-ended nature learners recite a fictional or real account of an event or an experience sequentially, paving the way for the learners' imagination. For cultivation of critical thinking skills in collaboration with spoken language proficiency, Sedaghat and Biria (2016) have reported that narrative techniques are considerably effective. If a language learner undergoes a task that requires use of imagination expressed through the target language, it simultaneously engages the learner in critical thinking.

The Research Questions

This paper explores how critical thinking can be promoted and nurtured in learners of limited competence, who have just entered the first semester of an undergraduate curriculum in an EFL context. Although they have limited vocabulary and their grammatical accuracy shows characteristics of interlanguage, it has been observed that they can follow instructions and execute tasks of independent text construction. The best and the most suitable text type that the EFL learners enjoy constructing is that of a narrative. It has also been observed that they can construct narrative texts, especially after critical reading and analysis of some good samples in collaboration with the teacher in class. The question remains, how far they can reflect application of critical thinking skills in their own construction of narrative texts especially if their vocabulary and grammar resources are limited. Experience says that if tasks (and eventually the assessment criteria) meant for development of critical thinking skills are more intent upon conceptual appropriateness and acceptability than grammatical accuracy, it allows the learners to exercise a sense of freedom of expression of imagination that leads to practising critical thinking which is implicit. In this context, this paper pursues three research questions:

- a. With the help of implicit critical thinking, can learners further a narrative by taking independent decisions in adding entities, actions/events, time dimensions and locations?
- b. Can learners be creative in conceptualizing a crisis/problem in a narrative and can they offer a solution?
- c. Can learners demonstrate cohesion and coherence in a short narrative construction through sequencing events despite constraints of accuracy in their writing?

Hypotheses

The major hypothesis here is that an EFL learner of first year of undergraduate study, while still being at a certain stage of interlanguage showing inaccuracy or fossilization of a few grammatical structures in clausal, verbal, nominal, and prepositional domains, can demonstrate critical thinking in evaluating and decision-making in varying degrees while succeeding in construction of a short narrative text.

Construction of a short narrative involves critical thinking through four cognitive actions: one, sequencing events or actions of human entities; two, conceptualizing events in frames of time and space; three, in addressing a problem in the plot by offering a solution as a product of pure imagination, and four, in achieving overall cohesion and coherence in a short narrative.

An Overview of Narratives and Their Use for Language Learning

This section presents certain theoretical insights into the content of narratives to establish that the act of creating new narratives involves critical thinking in a major way. Polkinghorne (1988) defines narrative as the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite (p.13). In Bruner's (1990) view, a narrative is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states and happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. These are constituents, but they do not have meaning of their own. They gain meaning by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole. Hence, the principal property of a narrative is its inherent sequentiality (p.43). Sequentiality is clearly a textual property which is created by a text-creator, understandably by using critical thinking. Focusing exclusively on a single aspect of sequentiality, Abbot (2014) approaches narratives as the principal way in which humans organize their understanding of time. He suggests that the ability of managing time fluidly within a narrative allows events themselves to create the order of time (p.3). Hazel (2007) points out that narrative construction is nothing but comprehension and expression of events changing over time. In his scheme, the crucial functions of narrative construction are event selection and event sequencing and the creator of narratives demonstrate planning and problem-solving abilities. Regarding the structure of a narrative, the six elements elaborated by Labov & Waletzky (1997) and Labov (2001) are abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation,

resolution, and coda. It is understood that if a piece of text is qualitatively judged as a narrative, it should have these components.

The literature on use of narratives for language learning especially development of writing of the EFL learners is quite vast but a few references are relevant in the present context. Luna (2010) reports four syntactic interlanguage features, namely, extensive use of the determined article ('the'), generalized absence of undetermined articles ('a, an'), extensive word repetition due to lack of synonyms and lack of discursive links/linking devices (transition markers and adverbials). It is interesting and of importance that in spite of these interlanguage features, the texts created by the learners are discernibly narratives. Asikin (2017) explores interlanguage in narrative writing texts of class 12 students in Indonesia and reports that interlanguage exists in the following: forming passive sentence, choosing incorrect verb agreement, choosing wrong auxiliary and translating sentence word by word from the first language. Interlanguage, in his view exists due to the strong influence of native language. Expecting the presence of some of the grammatical shortcomings in the writing of the subjects, this work stresses upon the conceptual constituents in narrative texts constructed by students.

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The Target Construction in This Task

In line with the three research questions mentioned in section 3, the learners were asked to construct a short narrative text, as a target construction that has the following:

- a. A few entities with some plausible communicative relations
- b. A few actions which can be seen in a sequence to perceive a movement in plot
- c. A few expressions of location showing spatial orientation of actions
- d. A few expressions indicating the time of actions in terms of duration, point of time or unspecified time
- e. At least one expression that shows a crisis/problem in the plot
- f. At least one expression that shows a solution in the plot
- g. (Optional) A pair of dialogues
- h. (Optional) An expression of a moral lesson
- i. An overall coherence

As the research component was embedded into an institutional course and was linked with an assessment plan, the learners were trained to understand through instruction each of the above aspects. Four texts were discussed in class to explain and reinforce comprehension of items (a) to (i) above. Consequently, they were given 4 incomplete stories and were asked to complete them in the way they could.

Preparation towards Task Fulfillment

The data were collected from a module called English for General Reading and Writing which is delivered at level 3 of an undergraduate programme, the first level after the Foundation Programme. The students were taken through a number of lessons of studying narratives and their essential components towards the task where they were asked to construct their own narrative texts. The students needed to understand the contents of narratives. Hence, in the course, four stories were discussed in detail in class:

- a. *The Shoemaker and the Elves* – a fairy tale story
- b. *A different kind of school* – a modern short story meant for teenagers
- c. *Maha of the Mountains* – a story of social theme by HH Princess Rania of Jordon

d. *The Old Man and the Sea* (abridged) – a classic with a strong philosophical content

While discussing the stories, 10 aspects of each story were analyzed and each student was given the following table to record their responses:

	Part /aspect of the story	Your comments	More notes
1	Title		
2	Characters		
3	Setting		
4	Time		
5	Actions		
6	Dialogues		
7	Crisis/problem		
8	Solution		
9	Anything unexpected?		
10	Any lessons?		

Table 1: A frame used by students while taking notes on the constituents of a narrative

After that, the first five aspects were given to the students to write the beginning of a story using this frame. Initially the students were asked to form pairs and write the beginning of a story with the help of a frame. Forty-five texts were submitted. From that four texts were selected and each student was asked to expand any one of the texts. Twenty-five samples were selected as data for this study.

The 4 unfinished stories are the following (the language has not been corrected or modified):

1. One day, the shepherd would graze the sheep as usual, but there were sheep that were displaced from the herd so he began to try to draw his attention and summon him in the usual ways by whistling or blowing the trumpet found with him. As it was, the shepherd became angry, so he threw a stone to alert the sheep, but he broke the horn of sheep, and the shepherd feared a lot, and he began to see the sheep as he asked him not to tell the owner of the sheep that he was the one who broke his horn.

2. Once upon a time there was a man called jack and he lived in a small village with his family, they were poor and they have only a cow. One morning jack's mother told him to pick up the cow to the market and sell it so that they can buy some foods. In the market Jack met an old man, his name is Henry and he make a deal that sell to him the cow and in the return he will give him a magic beans that will going to change his life completely.

3. There was a little girl who always wore a red robe which is why everyone called her “the girl in red”. Her the name was Leila. One day her mother asked her to take a basket with cookies and medicinal herbs for her sick grandmother who lived in another house across a small forest area.

4. There was a poor child. He lives in a small village with his family. He works in a small café for the money after that extends to his family. Suddenly, the small coffee was closed due to its loss. The poor child cried and decided to find a job. When he was looking for work. An old man saw him and took him home. The old man asked the child what he was looking for. The child said he was looking for work to get money and it was better to feed his family.

Procedure of Analysis

From among the submissions, 25 texts were chosen for the analysis. First, the 25 texts have been ordered in terms of descending length, i.e. number of words. At this stage their merits in terms of accuracy or creativity have been disregarded. Each of the 25 texts was examined in terms of accuracy in spelling and punctuation as well as accuracy in nominal structures, verbal structures, tense and aspect and prepositional phrases. Each of the 25 texts was examined regarding how far they fulfilled the notional

constituents of a short narrative: entity, action, time, location, problem and solution. Each of the 25 texts was qualitatively examined regarding their coherence. A raw count and then a percentage have been taken for each of the aspects mentioned above. Following are five samples which show how each text was analyzed.

Text 1/25

jack agreed he trusted the old man and sell him the cow. for some time the old man get out some beans and gave jack one beans.while jack was surprised the old man disappeared with the cow.jack look up for the old man but he didn't find him.jack went back home hopeful that the beans will change his life to better.the next day jack told his mother what happened to him the day after.jack mother got angry and said "how could you trust a man you dont even know him?" jack replied"idont think that the old man tricked me he looks so kaind and helpful."let me try the beans i will ask for food "pleas magic beans give me some food."but the beans didnt work jack was trying over and over but nothing happened.jacks mother was so sod and said"what we going to do now we have no food no mony and nothing to do. jack felt so sorry and got down his ness and said "i promise mom i will fiwevery thing...i promise i never trust some idont know him"one week later jack went to the market and on the way to his grand fathersheshop he saw the old man and he was tricking pepole .jack screen "i fond him dont trust this man he is lair he cheated me with a stupid beans and took my caw".(233 words)



Text no	Length In words	ACCURACY ASPECTS (Neg)						NOTIONAL ASPECTS						Coherence
		N= Nominal	P=Punctuation	V= Verbal domain	TA= Tense & Aspect	PP= Preposition Ph	S= Spelling	Entity	Action sequencing	Time	Location	Problem	Solution	
2	173		x		x		x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 2: A comparison of the student's performance in aspects of accuracy and notion

Text 10/25

The old man has too much combneys and he decided to teek the poor child to complit his school because the old man want to give the poor child job in his companey and he can't joun in this combneys without degree . After 5 years the poor child finish his school and he get excellent results .The old man feel happy and become proud of him .After one week the poor child started work in company and become very rich and all his family become happy and proud of him. (92 words)

Text no	Length In words	ACCURACY ASPECTS (Neg)						NOTIONAL ASPECTS						Coherence
		N= Nominal	P=Punctuation	V= Verbal domain	TA= Tense & Aspect	PP= Preposition Ph	S= Spelling	Entity	Action sequencing	Time	Location	Problem	Solution	
10	92	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 3: A comparison of the student's performance in aspects of accuracy and notion

Text 13/25

In the morning, Jack went to market in order to buy food for the cow. His mother asked him, "Jack please buy food for the cow today because I am busy." But he was unable to buy that food. So he told the seller to give him the right food. When he bought that food, it was not appropriate for the cow. So it could not eat and he returned the food again. He bought the food that the cow can eat. (82 words)

Text no	Length In words	ACCURACY ASPECTS (Neg)						NOTIONAL ASPECTS						Coherence
		N= Nominal	P=Punctuation	V= Verbal domain	TA= Tense & Aspect	PP= Preposition Ph	S= Spelling	Entity	Action sequencing	Time	Location	Problem	Solution	
13	82							√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Table 4: A comparison of the student's performance in aspects of accuracy and notion

Text 18/25

The old man decided to help the poor child. Remember the old man is the owner of a small factory. Someone wants to work with him. The old man took the child to the factory owner, who decided to run him with him in the small factory. The child felt happily. The child thanked the old man for looking for work for him. (63 words)

Text no	Length In words	ACCURACY ASPECTS (Neg)						NOTIONAL ASPECTS						Coherence
		N= Nominal	P=Punctuation	V= Verbal domain	TA= Tense & Aspect	PP= Preposition Ph	S= Spelling	Entity	Action sequencing	Time	Location	Problem	Solution	
18	63			x			x	√	√	√	√	x	√	√

Table 5: A comparison of the student's performance in aspects of accuracy and notion

Text 23/25

The old man hired the poor child in his house to wash cars and support his poor family. The poor child become pleased for this work. He bought food and coats for his family from his first salary. And his family become happy. (43 words)

Text no	Length in words	ACCURACY ASPECTS (Neg)						NOTIONAL ASPECTS						Coherence
		N=Nominal	P=Punctuation	V= Verbal domain	TA= Tense & Aspect	PP= Preposition Ph	S= Spelling	Entity	Action	Time	Location	Problem	Solution	
23	43			x		x		√	√	√	√	x	√	√

Table 6: A comparison of the student's performance in aspects of accuracy and notion

The five samples furnished above show that they vary in terms of length and in terms of the number of grammatical parameters where negative evidence is related to a standard of interlanguage performance. What is positive and is encouraging for any pedagogic implication is that all the samples tested positive for handling most of the notional aspects accurately in the texts and so was the aspect of coherence, which was a reflection of handing the time sequence in an orderly manner. This encourages the teacher in deciding to entrust students with narrative constructions for practising critical thinking.

The Final Result

The survey of all the twenty-five texts are presented in the table below. The accuracy aspects are given a negative score with a cross (x) mark if there are errors registered in the text and the notional aspects are given a tick (√) mark on the basis of correctness.

Text no	Length In words	ACCURACY ASPECTS (Based on Errors)						NOTIONAL ASPECTS (Based on Correctness)						Coherence
		N=Nominal	P=Punctuation	V= Verbal domain	TA= Tense & Aspect	PP= Preposition Ph	S= Spelling	Entity	Action sequencing	Time	Location	Problem	Solution	
1	233		x		x		x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	173		x		x			√	√	√	√	√	√	√
3	147		x					√	√	√	√	√	√	√
4	134	x	x		x		x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
5	134	x	x		x		x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
6	134	x	x	x	x		x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
7	105		x			x		√	√	√	√	√	√	√
8	105		x	x	x			√	√	√	√	X	√	√
9	100				x			√	√	√	√	√	√	√
10	92	x	x	x	x	x	x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
11	87	x			x	x		√	√	√	√	√	√	√
12	87			x				√	√	√	√	√	√	√
13	82							√	√	X	√	√	X	√
14	82	x	x					√	√	√	√	X	√	√
15	79		x	x				√	√	√	√	X	√	√
16	73			x			x	√	√	√	√	X	√	√

17	68		x					√	√	√	√	√	√	√
18	63			x			x	√	√	√	√	X	√	√
19	62		x					√	√	√	√	√	X	√
20	53		x				x	√	√	√	√	√	X	√
21	53		x	x			x	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
22	47				x			√	√	X	√	x	√	√
23	43							√	√	√	√	x	√	√
24	43		x				x	√	√	X	√	√	X	√
25	32						x	√	√	√	√	√	X	√
TOTAL		6	16	8	10	12	11	25	25	22	25	18	20	25
Error %		24%	48%	32%	40%	48%	44%							
Accuracy Percentage		76%	52%	68%	60%	52%	56%	100%	100%	88%	100%	72%	80%	100%

Table 7: An overall comparison of students' performance in accuracy and notional aspects

To summarize the results, aspects of accuracy in punctuation, spelling and grammar show lower percentage. The range is 52-76%. Aspects of notion and coherence show much higher percentage – between 72-100%.

How does this exercise direct pedagogy?

This work is based on the philosophy that research on classroom activities should directly benefit pedagogy that aims at enhancing the learning experience. The following points could be taken back to the classroom of writing where the teacher needed to develop critical thinking:

a. This model of delivery of narrative texts can continue with the following stages:

Read narratives – Identify and describe constituents – Write a beginning – Seek feedback -- Continue writing one initiated by a peer – Seek feedback from lecturer.

b. The lecturer can either overlook aspects of accuracy in punctuation, spelling and grammar during text creation in class or can give individual feedback to students committing a certain type of error.

c. The lecturer can (at least in this module) exclude aspects of accuracy from the assessment criteria as well as the marking scheme.

d. The lecturer can distribute marks across the criteria of entities, action sequencing, time and location, problem and solution, coherence which reflect critical thinking.

Concluding Remarks

There are a few challenges in this task. The first one is the rate of productivity among EFL learners in terms of length of texts. In 30 minutes' time, only 9 learners out of 25 wrote more than 100 words. Given the fact that students are at the post-foundation level, more research needs to be done to ascertain if this rate is too challenging. Those who wrote less than 100 words in 30 minutes need to be trained in how to think and write simultaneously. In a mixed-ability group that remains a challenge. Narrative construction is a highly complex cognitive process. Some of its facets are known to the lecturer but not necessarily to the student. At a lower level, the teacher should be restrained in maintaining simplicity of instruction. It is the teacher and not the students who should ensure that different aspects of critical thinking are synthesized through this type of a task. On the other hand, the task should not be perceived by learners as a simplistic story-telling task which has no challenges of creative thinking involved in it.

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