

# Uses of Narrative in English Language Studies: Cognition, Culture, and Narrative

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## Introduction

The article aims to discuss **the use of narrative as a teaching and learning modality** from the **perspective of an educational psychologist and curriculum and instructional programs specialist**, the academic areas of the author for more than forty years. **First Piaget's work**, whose lectures the author had the honor of attending at Université de Genève in the early 1970s, particularly his formulation of the development of cognitive schemata related to causality will be briefly presented. **Then cultural narratives** will be used to illustrate **how individual human development and various stages of cultural perceptions of causality may show parallels** along the Piagetian developmental perspective. **Finally**, the last theme will deal with relating the uses of cognitive and cultural schemata to narratives in terms of **curricular concerns**.

## Piaget's Formulation of Cognitive Schemata Related to Causality

According to Piaget, **the organism is in need of equilibrium**. This can only be achieved by the **two processes of assimilation and accommodation**. **Assimilation is the integration of observed regularities of experience into existing structures**, which Piaget calls cognitive schemata. **If the existing schemata are not capable of integrating the observed regularities, they have to be modified or re-constructed** for such integration. **The change in existing schemata** to integrate the newly assimilated experience is done **through the process of accommodation**. Once **these two processes are complete**, the organism reaches equilibrium **until new information requires new assimilation and accommodation** processes.

There are **four stages** of cognitive development according to Piaget. The **first is the sensory-motor stage**, where the infant **until the age of two** learns through his/her senses and movement. **The second stage between two to seven** years of age is called the **pre-operational period**, where there is rudimentary effort to understand the regularities in stimuli, but attributions of causality are loose, and often imaginary as in myths. **The third stage between the ages of seven to eleven is concrete operational**, where correct attributions of causality are made related to observable, directly experienced concrete phenomena. Finally, causal links can be made using symbolic

representation of phenomena in the **formal operational stage, after the age of eleven or twelve. This is the stage in cultural anthropology where the myth loses its explanatory power** (of course not its aesthetic and historical contribution) and **is replaced by the hypothetico-deductive models of science** (sometimes lacking aesthetic concerns).

Thus, **Piaget** has shown that searching for and finding logical explanations for observed regularities among stimuli is a natural developmental process. **The human being codes experiences in causal frames through the delineation of antecedent conditions and their consequents.** Understanding causality rests on a **developmental continuum.**

### **Cultural Narratives and Cultural Development Related to Causality**

At the **cultural level stories with beginnings, developments, and ends** have perhaps been one of the **first efforts of communicating individual and collective experiences to others through the sequencing of events.** These narrations may or may not have **causal spatio-temporal links**, as in cases of **description where causality is not a requirement versus explanatory attempts, where it is.** Narratives may or may not be related to **identity disclosure versus objectification of real or imagined processes and outcomes.**

One example of **identity disclosure with loosely woven causal spatio-temporal links is culturally generated legends**, related to the **symbolic representation of collective historical experiences.** Another **pseudo-causal explanatory narrative type is myths**, where **meaning is attributed to observed regularities of complex multi-causal phenomena through sanctifying some spiritual agent or agents.** The need for myths arises mostly in trying to understand natural events or justifying belief systems. In both cases of narration, **reality is reduced to comprehensible sequential units**, which then **have the possibility of being remembered and thus shared.** Again in both legends and myths, **the story structure imposed on experience makes retention and transmission possible.**

At present, there is no need to use legends and myths as explanatory structures of comprehension. **Science with stronger demonstrated causal links has taken on the epistemological responsibility.** Thus **individual and cultural development seem to parallel each other.** But, whether legends, myths or science, **the human mind is in need of structures to reduce reality to comprehensible units, and to attribute causality to the spatio-temporal links among these units.** Narrative is a powerful medium to accomplish these goals.

### **The Use of Narrative in Instruction: Some Curricular Concerns**

Instruction in content areas **from science to social sciences to humanities does not often involve the use of narrative as a method.** Thus, **learning** may be sequential like in mathematics, sciences, and language learning, but **it is disjointed and discrete due**

**to not being connected by some sort of unifying structure of experience. The story is such a structure.** Today, some very **effective physicists are able to use narrative** in explaining very complex scientific processes and outcomes.

Thus, **using narrative in language teaching and learning seems to have natural ties with human retention and schemata building.** In fact **studies have shown that the use of narrative facilitates inferential comprehension** (Alptekin and Erçetin, 2011; Kintsch and Rawson, 2007). As an educational psychologist and a curriculum and instructional methodologist, let me share with you **several concerns related to the usage of narrative in language teaching and learning.** These issues will be structured from the broadest to the more specific.

### **Is Narrative Used As the Context, Method or Evaluation of Instruction?**

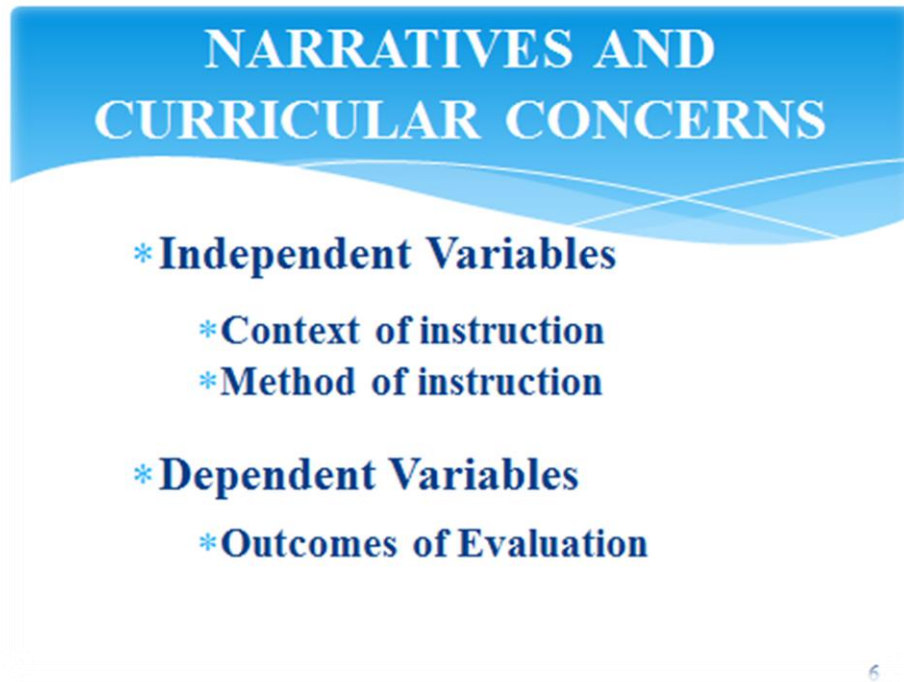
First, it is **not clear whether narrative is used as the context** of instruction in language studies, **as opposed to an instructional method,** or if it is used **for the evaluation of outcomes.** In other words, **is the usage of narrative related to the context of teaching and learning, its methodology, or its evaluation?** In language learning and teaching, narrative functions not only as a medium of instruction, but the dialogical co-construction of the story with the participation of the teacher and student or students becomes also a method of teaching and learning. In addition, the story once completed turns into an outcome to be evaluated against certain criteria. **These different roles of the narrative have to be delineated against different criteria. Otherwise confounding of variables** related to context, method, and outcome of instruction will take place, if separate criteria are not formulated for each.

All of these three categories are different and require different criteria of functionality. **No topic, method, or evaluation format can be a panacea for all. If narrative is the context of learning, the related learning objectives have to be clearly specified in terms of student outcomes.** Comparison studies such as narrative text versus expository texts in attaining specific objectives have to be carried out. As an example, **what kind of context is better for which type and level of learning is an important question.**

On the other hand, **if narrative is used as a method, the procedures to be followed have to be clearly delineated.** In this case, **evaluation of outcomes has to be independent of the methodology used.** That **the method is viable has to be substantiated by independent criteria related to standards and performance based assessment devices.**

**If narrative is used for evaluation purposes, rather than for context or method, then the criteria of evaluation have to be distinctly and clearly specified.** In addition, **the context, and methodologies used must be different from evaluation devices,** because **evaluation is used to assess the functionality levels of the context and the method of instruction.**

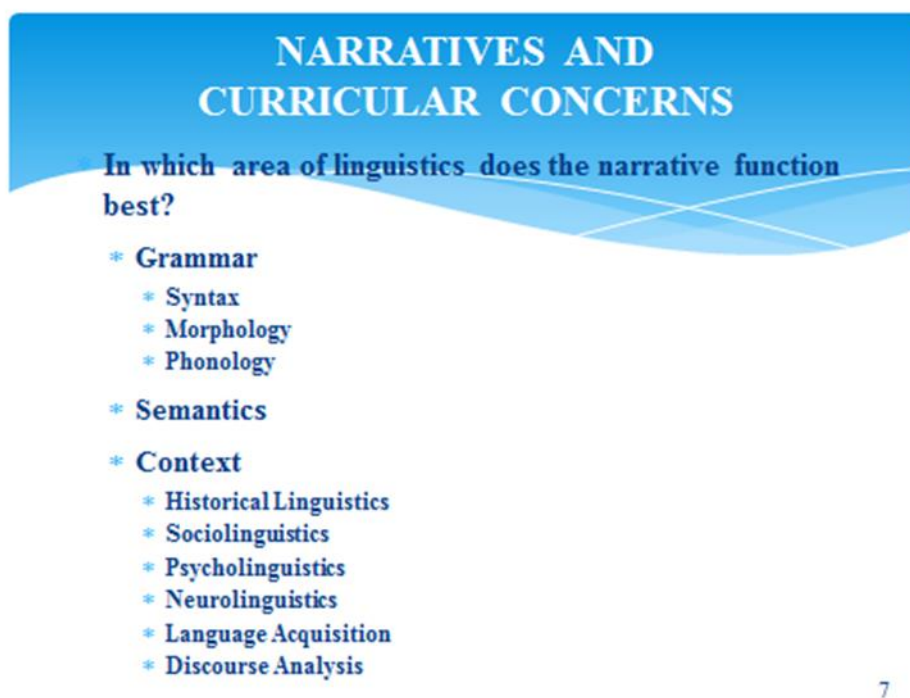
The manipulations in the **methods** used, **or in the context** in which what is acquired is embedded **are the independent variables** in the equation, of which **evaluation outcomes are the resultant dependent variables**. Thus, it would be informative if distinctions are made in the use of narrative as the **context of instruction related to learning objectives versus its usage as a method of teaching and learning**. **Evaluation procedures**, on the other hand, **measure learning outcomes which are the dependent variables being affected by, and related to different contexts and methodologies**. These distinctions would clarify what functions as the independent and the dependent variables in any particular research. Figure 1 shows the use of narrative as independent and dependent variables.



**Figure 1.** The use of narrative as independent and dependent variables

#### The Use of Narrative in Different Areas of Linguistics

The **second curricular concern** is related to the **nature of the field of linguistics**. We may **divide** the field of **linguistics into the three areas of grammar, semantics, and context**. **Grammar** would include **syntax, morphology, and phonology**; **semantics** would involve issues of **meaning**; and **context** can be divided into several categories such as **historical, socio-, psycho-, and neuro-linguistics, language acquisition, and discourse analysis**. Figure 2 shows the areas of linguistics, and the possible use of narrative within each of these areas.



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**Figure 2.** Areas of linguistics and the use of narrative

**In the teaching and learning of which of these three areas of linguistics is narrative most effective?** For example, **is the use of narrative more conducive to the learning and teaching in the area of semantics rather than grammar?** In semantics, will desired outcomes be achieved if narrative is used as the context versus the methodology, or will narrative function better in the evaluation of learning and teaching? If narrative is more directly related to the area of semantics, then **what context, method, or evaluation procedure is more enhanceive for the areas of grammar and context of language?** Within grammar, **what are the best means and ways of teaching syntax as opposed to phonology or morphology in place of narrative?** **What is the effect of tacit learning of grammar or contextual components of linguistics, when narrative is used as a method of teaching and learning?** You as academicians in the area have the answers to these questions, **while I am merely proposing possible research strategies.** Figure 3 shows possible research designs in different areas of linguistics.

Possible Research Designs on Areas of Linguistics and the Use of Narrative					
Areas of Linguistics	Sub-areas of Linguistics	Narrative Context	Narrative Method	Narrative Evaluation	Non-Narrative
Semantics		X	X	X	X
Grammar	Phonology				
	Morphology				
	Syntax	X		X	X
Context of Language	Historical				
	Socio-ling				
	Psycho-ling				
	Neuro-ling				
	Language Acquisition				
	Discourse Analysis	X	X		

**Figure 3.** Possible research designs in areas of linguistics (The x's are merely possible research examples which may neither be exhaustive nor necessary.)

As is seen, **this paradigm is very versatile in terms of possible research. Numerous designs become feasible, the outcome of which will be useful in bringing to light what kind of context, methodology or evaluation is better for the teaching and learning of the semantic, grammar and context areas of linguistics.** Furthermore, such designs are capable of rendering the degree of appropriateness of using narrative in each of these three areas of linguistics.

#### **Age-Related Effectiveness of the Use of Narrative in Different Areas of Linguistics**

**Until the 70's, grammar was taught separately, unrelated to story construction.** To give a personal example, as a student starting junior high school at the age of 11 at the American Academy in Istanbul, I learned grammar from the series of books called Gatenby, where there was an emphasis on **grammatical exercises at the end of each unit.** At the time, the **communicative approach or the constructivist theories of teaching and learning a foreign language were not yet functional.** Still, we all **learned grammar,** were able to use syntactical, morphological, and phonological elements rather well, **and could transfer our formal schemata to spontaneous speech and writing.** Of course, on the other hand, learning grammar was not the only means of

language acquisition; we were immersed in a Turco-American context, with its semantic and contextual variables. **As opposed to this experience**, I lived in the Netherlands for a period of two and a half years, about 15 years ago, and tried **to learn Dutch by a totally different method, the communicative approach**. The outcome was pathetic.

Here again is a wealth of research possibilities. **What is the relationship of contexts, and methods of teaching and learning a language in relation to stages of human development? Is a particular context or method of learning and teaching language more appropriate at one stage of development and not so effective at another? If a particular method is effective at one stage of development and is not functional in another stage, with what should this method be replaced in other stages of life?** Here, **age, context and method of learning and teaching are independent variables, while various performance standards are the dependent variables**. Figure 4 shows possible research determining the age-related effectiveness of the use of narrative.

Possible Research Designs on Areas of Linguistics and the Use of Narrative									
Areas of Linguistics	Sub-areas of Linguistics	Narrative Context		Narrative Method		Narrative Evaluation		Non-Narrative	
		Older	Young	Older	Young	Older	Young	Older	Young
Semantics		X	X	X	O	X	O	X	-
Grammar	Phonology								
	Morphology								
	Syntax	-	X	-	-	X	X	X	-
Context of Language	Historical								
	Socio-ling								
	Psycho-ling								
	Neuro-ling								
	Language Acquisition	X	X	?	X	X	X	X	?
	Discourse Analysis	X	X	X	-	X	?	X	X

**Figure 4.** Possible research on age-related effectiveness of narrative

In short, **there seems to be a need for methodologically sound studies, showing what contexts, methods, and evaluation procedures function best for the semantic, grammar and context areas of linguistics**. In addition, **matching these variables with stages of human development would be informative as well as useful**. Recently there is again an interest in comparison studies, using different approaches for different skill areas. Since nothing can serve as a panacea for all, I think these comparison studies will be illuminating and educative.

#### **The Use of Narrative Through Separate Themes or A Continuous Story Line Within the Communicative Approach in Different Areas of Linguistics**

**The third concern** from the standpoint of a curriculum designer would be related to **the use of narrative through separate themes within the communicative approach, as opposed to a continuous story line.** Research in the area has shown that the use of **thematically different texts that are simplified improves literal understanding but not inferential comprehension.** Would a continuous story line with constant characters in different settings ameliorate the communicative approach in comparison to isolated themes such as going to the movies, grocery shopping etc.? **Yano, Long, and Ross in 1994 state, a continuous story line would be richer in terms of connections and detail.** Thus, **simplifications improve literal but not inferential understanding.** Comparative studies on the effects of isolated discrete themes versus a continuous story line with constant characters within the communicative approach would be worth investigating, related to the three areas of linguistics.

#### Cultural Elements Embedded in the Use of Narrative

At the beginning of this exposé, the development of causality through cognitive and cultural schemata building was emphasized. The level of appropriateness of narrative to the developmental level of the learner is noted in most instructional settings. **The next point is on the problematic area related to the cultural correspondence of constructs in narrative and the learners' cultural and cognitive schemata.**

**The conference<sup>3</sup>** (where this paper evolved from my key note speech) **stressed that any co-construction in language studies starts in the “middle”.** It does not matter whether the dialogical interaction is in person or in the formation of a text. This may be a creative concept with heuristic qualities. **But is this the best metaphor of human interactions at various levels?**

**Every human interaction involves the complicated cognitive and personal past of the participating individuals.** In addition, the effects of permanent or transitory cultural variables as well as the social contexts of the participants which may indeed be diverse are in the background of each interaction. These background variables will have a strong impact on the present interaction. However, **participants will diverge in the future into different directions from the point of convergence.** The “middle” assumes a spatio-temporal continuum, where there is one such point, and no other. Since there is no way of knowing whether the present interaction is in the middle of the time line, taking as a base the lifespan of the participants or the episodic range of the interaction, a better concept would be ‘points of convergence’. The idea of ‘points of convergence’ deals with interception in the present, which has an assumed past and future, without reference to a specific middle point. There may be many points of convergence at several discrete

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<sup>3</sup> *In Medias Res: Uses of Narrative In English Language Studies, International Interdisciplinary Conference, Near East University, Kyrenia, North Cyprus, September 26-27, 2013*



**occasions in time with another person, with differently constructed pasts and diverse futures. If we use the concept of 'points of convergence', we will not have the problem of locating the "middle" of such a series of interactions. Nor do we have to worry about a continuum of time, and whether or not the interaction is really in the middle between the pasts and futures of the interacting parties. Neither do we have to deal with the impossible delineation of the background conceptual history and its equality to the future, where attributions of meaning change within the lifespan of interacting parties.**

### **Biases of Cultural Constructs in the Use of Narrative**

At the point of convergence of narrative text with the learner, there may be **biases in the underlying cultural constructs, favoring those of the native speakers who develop the texts.** The commonalities or diversities between the cultural constructs in narrative, and those of the learner raise **ethical issues related to differences in ideologies at the macro-level. At the individual level, ethical issues emerge related to emotional responses of the learner to the use of unfamiliar cultural constructs in the narrative, as well as what it is that the learner is supposed to learn from these cultural constructs.** Gary Barkhuizen, in his article "Narrative Knowledge in TESOL" (2011), **touches upon the problem of the moral positioning of the narrator.** The ethnocentric orientations in narrative present potent complicated problems which affect learning. Fish's (1980) emphasis on the **development of "interpretive communities", where the text is rewritten resting on shared assumptions, values, and associations, as well as Sinclair's (2004) concept of "shared knowledge"** are indeed **useful notions that might facilitate learning by reducing the interference of cultural components.** Nativization of narrative to fit the cultural constructs of the learner may also be a useful procedure to **diminish the effect of textual interference.** A study was done by Alptekin and Erçetin of Boğaziçi University in Istanbul (2011), where an American story based in New York was adapted to the **Turkish learners' social context and cultural constructs.** The findings showed that **those exposed to the culturally adapted text showed higher inferential comprehension in comparison to those exposed to the original American text, while there was no difference in the literal comprehension of the two groups.**

**While nativization of texts and interpretive communities may translate cultural constructs for the learner to increase comprehension, another tension arises. If one of the reasons of learning a language is trying to understand the cultural background of its native speakers, clearly nativization of texts and transformation of cultural constructs to fit the learners' cultural schemata will not accomplish this purpose. At what point of language learning is nativization of texts more appropriate? What about the age of the learner? Perhaps for older learners the transformation of cultural components to the learners' cultural schemata may enhance learning a language. For younger learners such transformations may not be necessary. These issues should also be researched.**

Thus, we must be aware of the **possible effects of cultural assumptions, modalities, values, and ways of constructing and responding to reality related to teaching and learning processes as well as their outcomes**. The process of investigating culturally appropriate modalities in language teaching and learning might have the additional benefit of having to **learn the cultural constructs of our students**. Such processes may help us as teachers of language to understand the richness of **diverse ways of constructing reality that define different cultural contexts**.

### Final Comments

In this article, I have tried to briefly discuss the **development of cognitive schemata at the individual and cultural levels, related to causality**. Then, I tried to **relate cognitive schemata building to the use of narrative in language learning**, emphasizing the **need for research in delineating how narrative functions as the context, method, or evaluation of instruction**. Such questions as, **what areas of linguistics does narrative serve best; whether a continuous narrative or unrelated themes facilitate better learning when the communicative approach is used; and at points of convergence in language learning, how the cultural constructs in the narrative operate for learners of diverse cultures** seemed worth sharing. I have no answers for these questions. I hope that the **concerns** presented here will have at least some **heuristic purpose**.

At this point of convergence, allow me to share with **you my belief that all human interaction is potent with wonderful and varied structures and myriads of stories to be shared without prejudice and in equity**. Nothing is more hopeful than the awareness that this thought is tacitly universal.

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