# What's the Story? Using the Narrative Approach in Beginning Language Classrooms

**Jeff McQuillan and Lucy Tse**

The primary purpose of beginning-level L2 courses is to provide students with interesting and comprehensible language input in a low anxiety setting (Krashen, 1982). This article introduces an approach to language teaching that incorporates the best of existing comprehension-based methods, such as the natural approach, and is at the same time a radically different way of envisioning second and foreign language instruction. The narrative approach does not focus the syllabus on grammatical structures or thematically organized vocabulary but on a simple yet powerful medium that provides students input: interesting and comprehensible stories. We will outline the theoretical rationale and research support for the narrative approach and suggest how to implement it in beginning-level second and foreign language classrooms.

## Rationale

In the past 30 years, innovations in comprehension-based language teaching methodologies (Winitz, 1981) such as Total Physical Response (TPR) (Asher, 1966) and the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) have proven as good as and usually better than form-focused instruction in building all areas of language competence, including vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and reading and writing ability (see Krashen, 1982, 1994, for reviews). These methods moved teachers away from the grammatical syllabus with its drill and practice and turned their attention to thematically organized curricula, with lessons centered around topics such as the family, hobbies, and students' personal interests.

The narrative approach takes comprehension-based language teaching to the next logical step: Teachers no longer need to focus on theme-specific vocabulary, particular notions and functions, or specific tasks. Instead, language input and class activities are driven exclusively by the telling of captivating, understandable stories. Students hear and see numerous stories, and as a consequence are exposed to a wide variety of vocabulary and structure. This language is recycled naturally as different versions of the story and related stories are told (see the sample story on p. 20), offering students multiple opportunities to encounter the target language. Eventually, as students become able to produce language spontaneously, they begin to write and tell their own stories.

Bruner (1986) and Smith (1990) have pointed to the prevalence of narratives in individuals' lives: Individuals use narratives to organize and make sense of past experiences and to understand new information. Individuals' natural interest and familiarity with narratives, then, make storytelling a powerful vehicle for supplying target language input and capturing student interest.

## Research Support

The narrative approach has already proven successful in L2 settings for children at the beginning and intermediate levels. Elley and Mangubhai (1983) used a story-based EFL program for intermediate-level elementary school students in the Fiji Islands. The experimental courses included illustrated books with stories that were told to and read by the children. In comparison with more traditional audiolingual methods, the storytelling "book flood" program produced significantly higher gains in almost all areas of language proficiency. These results were replicated in comparing book flood approaches with more traditional instruction among more than 3,000 intermediate EFL students in Singapore, nearly 5,000 students in South Africa, and 2,600 pupils in Sri Lanka (Elley, 1991; Elley & Foster, 1996; LeRoux & Schollar, 1996). Beginning- and intermediate-level L1 and L2 readers in Thailand, using a very similar approach to Elley's book flood program (termed *concentrated language encounter*), achieved supe-

rior results in terms of literacy when compared to more traditional language and literacy teaching methods (Walker, Rattanavich, & Oller, 1992).

The narrative approach incorporates the best of other approaches. Many of the ideas presented in this article are inspired by the book flood and early literacy shared book programs as described by Elley (1991, 1997) and Walker, Rattanavich, and Oller (1992); the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983); *Chalk Talks* (Shapiro & Genser, 1994) and *The Learnables* (Winitz, 1990); the Spanish video series *Destinos* (VanPatten, 1992); and particularly TPR storytelling, as implemented by Valerie Marsh (Marsh & Anderson, 1997) and Blaine Ray (Ray & Seely, 1997).

## Using The Narrative Approach

The narrative approach is designed for beginning- to intermediate-level language classes, with school-age and adult students. It is important to orient students and put their minds at ease by telling them that

- they will be listening to stories in the target language
- they will not understand everything that is said
- as long as they are following the general story line, they are acquiring new aspects of the target language

When students understand that they will not be held accountable for every word of the story, they are better able to relax and focus on getting the main idea of the narratives told in class.

There are four main steps in the narrative approach. Those described here are a modification of the TPR storytelling steps advocated by Marsh and Anderson (1997) and Ray and Seely (1997). TPR storytelling attempts to preteach the vocabulary included in the story and relies on a series of comprehension checks throughout the story. In our sequence, the preteaching is eliminated in favor of making the vocabulary comprehensible within the context of the story, and separate comprehension checking is reduced or eliminated entirely.

## Step 1: Telling the Core Story

Begin by telling a very short story (the *core story*) illustrated by drawings. The story needs to be very simple in the beginning, perhaps only four frames long (see the example on p. 20), and you can display it on the overhead projector or draw it on the chalkboard. Tell the story the first time by dramatizing it so that it is comprehensible from the beginning; you may point at the relevant items in the pictures or use gestures, body language, and props to demonstrate the story's meaning.

Then retell the story two or three times. With the second and third tellings, add more detail to the core story to maintain student interest. You can include characters' names and physical appearances, provide a setting for the story, and incorporate dialogue. You can write some of the new information (e.g., names of the characters) on the story frames, and after you have told the initial stories, you can gradually introduce words in the target language by writing them on the storyboard. However, do not label or introduce items into the story simply for the purpose of labeling them, as that would send the message to students that the activity was a pedagogical exercise rather than a real story. Instead, only include information that is directly relevant and natural to the story. By the end of the third telling, the core story may have tripled in length and detail.

> Individuals' natural interest and familiarity with narratives, then, make storytelling a powerful vehicle for supplying target language input and capturing student interest.

## Step 2: Revising the Story

After presenting the core story, tell different versions of it that are similar enough so that students can capitalize on the language acquired from the core story but distinct enough to constitute separate stories. As you narrate, you may draw the new versions on transparency sheets for an overhead projector, or you may use the chalkboard or large white poster paper. You need not be an artist; simple stick figures are sufficient. As long as students understand the story, your drawings have done the job.

Revising the core story allows for natural recycling of language in the context of a narrative. Examples of revisions include

- telling the same story with different characters or endings
- extending the story past its original ending
- narrating the story from a different character's point of view

## Step 3: The Class Creates a Story

The third step in the narrative approach is to guide the students in creating a class story, using blank frames on the overhead projector or on the board. Draw the frames of the story as it develops. This step allows for student participation from the first day, even in the initial stages when students are not able to produce the target language. For low-level beginning students, tell nearly the entire story but ask yes/no questions or give a menu of options to allow students to determine the direction of the story. The more creative—and humorous—the story, the better. If students share a common L1, they may use it for some of the discussion—as long as they hear you tell the finished story in English.

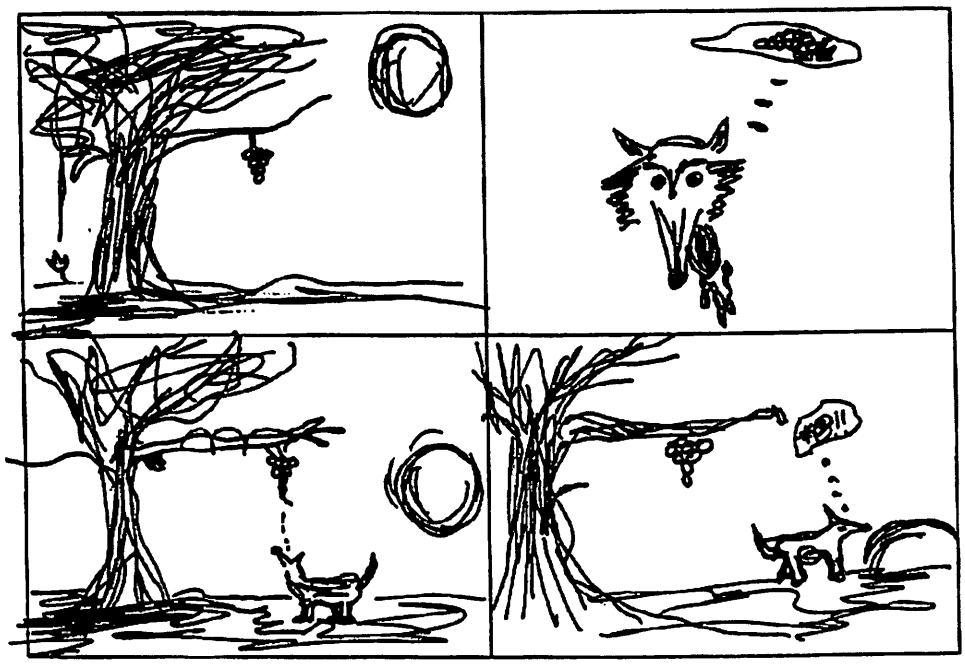
As students begin producing short phrases or simple sentences, you act more as an artist and scribe while students take charge in creating the story. At this level stories are typically more complex, with more detailed and sophisticated story lines. When the story is completed, retell it to the class to make sure that you got it right and to give students another opportunity to listen to their story.

It is important to encourage student creativity and foster student ownership of the stories as much as possible. Students are more likely to gain confidence in their language ability if they feel that they have been authors from the initial stages of language acquisition.

## Step 4: Students Create Stories and Books Independently

Having created a story with you, students then have a chance to create their own stories, either in small groups or individually. Give students blank story forms and ask them to illustrate their story lines. When students

# Sample Narrative Approach Story: The Fox and the Grapes



## Step 1: Tell the Story

The instructor refers to the drawing pictured above while telling the story.

### *First* Telling

Frame 1: There are grapes in the tree.

Frame 2: A fox sees the grapes. The fox gets hungry.

Frame 3: The fox jumps.

Frame 4: The grapes are too high. The fox gets angry.

### Second Telling

Frame 1: There are grapes in a tall tree.

Frame 2: A fox sees the purple grapes. The fox gets hungry.

Frame 3: The fox jumps once. He jumps twice. He jumps three times.

Frame 4: The grapes are too high. The fox gets angry, walks away, and curses.

### Third Telling

Frame 1: There are some purple grapes in a very tall tree in the forest.

Frame 2: A large, red fox named Harry sees the purple grapes. He gets hungry and runs toward the tree.

Frame 3. The fox jumps to try to eat the grapes. He jumps once. He jumps twice. He jumps three times.

Frame 4. The grapes are too high, so the fox gets angry. He walks away and curses. He walks down the road and buys himself a hamburger.

## Step 2: Revise the Story

The instructor makes new drawings while narrating the revised story.

### Revised Story: The Fox and the Bear

A fox and a bear are walking. They both see some grapes in a tree. They run toward the tree. The fox jumps, but he cannot reach the grapes. The bear jumps, but he cannot reach the grapes. The fox says to the bear, "Kneel down, and I will stand on your back. Then I can reach the grapes, and we can share them." The bear kneels. The fox jumps on his back. He grabs the grapes, jumps off the bear, and runs away with all the grapes.

## Step 3: Class Creates a Story

The instructor tells the story, allowing students to make choices (indicated in brackets) and to add details.

### Class Story: The Fox and the Bear Go Shopping

A fox and a bear are hungry. They walk to a market to buy some food.

The fox wants to eat some [hamburgers/chicken/pizza], but the bear wants to buy [grapes/apples/hot dogs].

The fox puts his [food choice] in a basket.

The bear puts his [food choice] in a basket. The two walk to the checkout counter.

The fox says, "I have no money!"

The bear says, ["Then no food for you!"/"I will pay for your food."]

The story continues with similar choices—the fox steals the bear's food or uses his charge card or asks the bear for a loan.

*"The Fox and the Grapes" story by Hoang Nguyen; used with permission.*

are not yet able to produce language, they illustrate stories, and you fill in the text and narrate them for the rest of the class. Some more advanced students may write words or short phrases in the target language under each frame to guide you in your narration. At higher levels, students themselves may write the text for their stories and volunteer to narrate the stories for the class. Once created, they can be shared with other students, providing another opportunity for students to receive input in the target language.

The four steps in the narrative approach move students from merely listening to guided participation to independent story creation and narration. By the end of one semester of a narrative approach class, you and your students will have created several dozen related stories that naturally recycle the target language and provide a rich bank of stories for teacher narration and student reading in future classes.

## Comprehension Checks

In current comprehension-based teaching methods, comprehension checks are used to confirm student understanding of material presented in the target language. In the natural approach, for example, suggested comprehension checks include true/false questions, matching activities, item categorization, and fill-in-the-blank exercises (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Unfortunately, regardless of the authenticity of the mode of input (in this case stories), comprehension checks often focus students on the language rather than the message that language conveys. As a result, the opportunity for students to lose themselves in a meaningful, content-focused activity is interrupted and often lost (S. D. Krashen, personal communication, July 15, 1997).

In our opinion, comprehension checks may not be necessary with the narrative approach. Built into the four-step approach are sufficient natural exposures to common vocabulary and structures for students to acquire the target language, and they will have many opportunities to encounter the same type of language in future stories. The key, then, is to supply students with stories in ample quantity and of high interest so that they will want to pay attention to them. We believe that if this occurs, students will acquire over time the language necessary for communication, as the stories will contain a wide variety of natural language rich in vocabulary and grammatical complexity.

How do you know whether students are following the story? Most teachers know from facial expressions and body language. If students are restless or their attention wanders, it is likely that they are not comprehending the story. Ideally, the affective environment of the classroom ensures that students—not having been forced to produce language until they are ready—feel comfortable enough to indicate when they do not understand the story. Another opportunity to guage comprehension is during Step 3, when the class creates a story together. Based on students' level of participation and their contributions, it becomes clear whether they have understood the core story.

Of course, students may be restless or not participate because they are simply not interested in the story. In this case, the remedy is to choose characters and story lines that are more interesting.

## Finding Stories

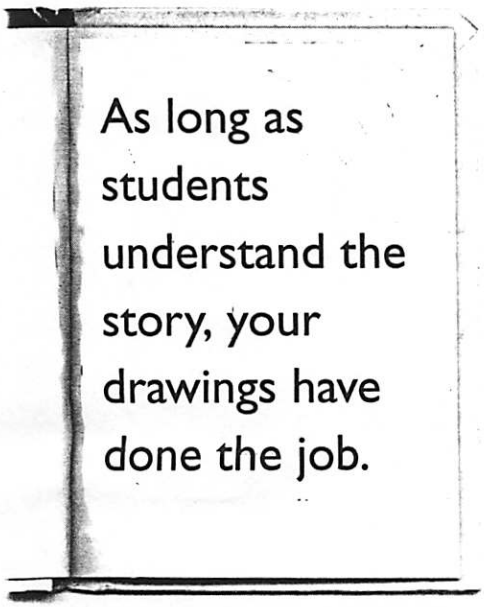
We are surrounded by stories in our daily lives. As the teacher, stories you tell in your classes can be versions of fairy tales, myths, and legends ranging from Cinderella to Greek mythology, depending on the language level, age, and sophistication of your students. True events—historical and current—also offer a wealth of stories. Students are often interested in events that occur in settings and involve people they are familiar with, such as a mystery involving their school or how you met your first girlfriend or boyfriend. Events in the news or on television and in movies make timely and relevant stories as well, giving you a chance to incorporate happenings and celebrities that students already find interesting. Finally, simplified versions of classical literature, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1594-1595/1967), are a sure bet for compelling and well-told narratives. Of course, stories may also come from your imagination and that of your students as they begin to create their own illustrated stories.

Another approach to creating stories is to use a cast of characters. This technique is similar to that used in book series such as Sweet Valley High (Pascal, 1984) and The Hardy Boys (Dixon, 1994), in which certain characters and settings are woven throughout the series. In this case, you create a group of core characters around whom the stories revolve. The stories can be any of the types mentioned in the previous paragraph, but are modified to cast the core characters in the key roles. Students add to the number of characters and also develop the personality and history of each character as the stories progress, and the students eventually get a chance to create their own stories.

By the end of one semester of a narrative approach class, you and your students will have created several dozen related stories that naturally recycle the target language and provide a rich bank of stories for teacher narration and student reading in future classes.

With time you will learn which stories work best in captivating the interest of your students. We have found it useful in training preservice teachers to keep in mind that the most interesting stories contain certain key elements. Most teachers—and students—already know this intuitively, but pointing out these elements may facilitate the creation and the retellings and expansions of the stories. Drawing from descriptions of story grammar (e.g., Baumann & Bergeron, 1993), we include the following key elements:

- Who? (the important characters in the story)
- Where? (the location of the story)
- When? (the time the story happens)




- What is the problem? (the problem or difficulty the characters have)
- What happened? (what is done to try to solve the problem)
- What is the solution? (how the problems were solved)

You can turn to this list when expanding or retelling stories in order to add new information or create new twists.

The last type of narrative is information or "how-to" stories. These stories can be instructional in nature—for example, how to bake a cake or find an apartment. However, it may be more difficult to capture the attention of all students because there may be less overlap in the types of things that all of the students would like to learn about.

## Space and Supplies

In a course based on the narrative approach, it is important to convey to students from the first day that this will not be a language class in the traditional sense. Instead, students will develop the target language through listening to and creating stories. It is best to arrange students in a natural configuration (e.g., a semicircle) for storytelling, and in small clusters of desks for group work. Ideally, the classroom will also have a separate library area where the student-created books can be kept and perhaps incorporated on the shelves with other published books. Art supplies, such as construction paper and marker pens, should also be available for writing and illustrating stories.

Student-created books can be from the class itself as it increases in proficiency or from intermediate-and advanced-level L2 students, who can write and illustrate texts for low-level classes, termed *handcrafted books* (Dupuy & McQuillan, 1997a, 1997b).

## The Missing Link in L2 Education

We have outlined an approach to language teaching that makes use of a powerful tool, stories. With the narrative approach, students can acquire the target language in an input-rich, interesting, low-anxiety setting. What is more, the use of narrative for beginning-level L2 development provides the language education field with an important missing link in the curricular sequence. Previous research has established that simplified texts and easy-to-read, light authentic reading materials such as comic books and young adolescent literature help bridge the gap from intermediate to advanced levels of language and literacy proficiency (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Dupuy, in press; Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1996; Tse, 1996; Tse & McQuillan, 1998). The narrative approach provides teachers with the link between beginning and intermediate levels in similar fashion.

The entire L2 and literacy curriculum, from beginning to advanced levels, can be organized around stories, providing interesting, comprehensible language to students at every step of the way. For beginners, the stories come from the narrative approach, handcrafted books, and low-level authentic texts. As students move gradually to the intermediate level, the stories come in the form of popular literature, such as adolescent fiction. Advanced students will be ready to tackle more difficult stories in the form of serious literature and general adult fiction. The narrative approach introduces the possibility of having the broader range of language teaching driven, and greatly enhanced, by the telling of stories.

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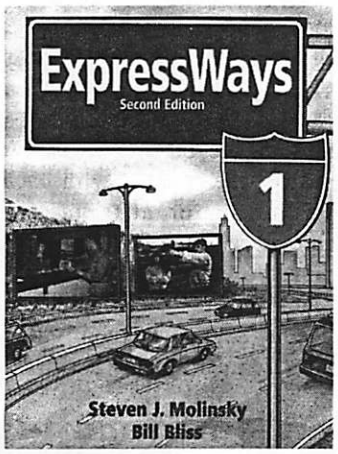
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