Readers Respond

Comments on Jeff McQuillan's and Lucy Tse's "What's the Story? Using the Narrative Approach in Beginning Language Classrooms"

Two Readers React ...

Contee Seely and Blaine Ray

We would like to applaud the fine article "What's the Story? Using the Narrative Approach in Beginning Language Classrooms" (Summer 1998), by Jeff McQuillan and Lucy Tse. The authors indicate that the narrative approach is inspired particularly by Total Physical Response (TPR) storytelling. There are some seven significant differences between the two approaches. Our experience using TPR storytelling shows that two of these are especially significant in the results achieved by students.[1]

First, the preteaching of vocabulary helps students comprehend and acquire language. A primary tenet underlying both the narrative approach and TPR storytelling is that comprehensible input is essential for acquisition. We have found—at all age levels—that students' comprehension is far worse when vocabulary is not thoroughly taught before a story is presented. This has the concomitant effect of increasing the anxiety level of many students, thereby violating another essential for acquisition.

The second significant difference is related to the first. We also have found that, in most classes, if the teacher does not make frequent systematic comprehension checks when teaching vocabulary, many students—in particular, less talented students—will suffer from lack of comprehension. Of course, where the checks show that comprehension is not being achieved, more preteaching must be done in order to avoid the consequences of enhanced stress and a lower level of comprehension, which in turn lead to a reduced level of acquisition.

The article does point out the importance of comprehension and describes certain unobtrusive ways in which checks can be accomplished (e.g., the teacher heeding facial expressions and body language, the creation of an affective environment in which students feel comfortable indicating when they do not understand). Whenever these ways actually do the job, there is no need to do anything further. However, in the typical language class with a dozen or more students, it is generally impossible to know whether every student is, in fact, understanding, unless further steps are taken. Comprehension is so important that the teacher must make sure it is achieved early in the process of vocabulary acquisition. When comprehension is achieved to the degree that it is nearly instantaneous at the vocabulary level, the succeeding stages of acquisition are greatly facilitated.

These two techniques—preteaching vocabulary and effective comprehension checks—are especially important because they have a cumulative effect. When they are not employed, many students get more and more lost as the course progresses. Students who are unable to follow a certain critical portion of the language they hear in the classroom (the portion varies from student to student), sooner or later drop out mentally and—subsequently—physically.

The article begins by saying that "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)" (p. 18). The omission of the preteaching of vocabulary and of the careful checking of comprehension of vocabulary run counter to this purpose. Including them supports it.

Note

[1] For more about the differences between the two approaches, we refer you to Ray, B., & Seely, C. (1998). *Fluency through TPR storytelling* (2nd ed.) (pp. xi-xii). Berkeley, CA: Command Performance Language Institute.

The Authors Respond ...

Jeff McQuillan and Lucy Tse

Seely and Ray differ with us on two aspects of our proposed narrative approach (McQuillan & Tse, 1998) for beginning language classrooms. First, they suggest that the vocabulary to be used in the stories must be thoroughly taught beforehand for students to be successful. Our own experiences have not shown this to be the case, however. The language of narrative approach stories can be made comprehensible without isolated vocabulary teaching, through techniques such as visuals, gestures, and intonation. Moreover, studies indicate that most vocabulary acquisition is incidental and incremental. Students pick up most new words while otherwise focusing on a meaningful activity, getting a bit more of the meaning each time they encounter the word in context (Elley, 1989). Explicitly teaching words thoroughly is not necessary and may even be undesirable. Analogous research on second language (L2) reading comprehension has found that preteaching vocabulary is a less effective form of aiding comprehension than providing extralinguistic clues of the sort we propose in the narrative approach (Hudson, 1982). Finally, even the lively activities of TPR that Seely and Ray suggest for preteaching vocabulary are, in our view, much less captivating for students than simply listening to a good story.

As for the use of comprehension checks, we again differ from Seely and Ray on what is possible and practical in an L2 classroom. In the narrative approach, there is no expectation that students will understand every word of the story, nor are they held accountable for such a standard. Freed of this burden, students are much more likely to engage in the storytelling activity as real listeners, rather than as passive students. As real listeners, students feel more comfortable asking questions or indicating a breakdown in comprehension when they do not understand. If that atmosphere is absent, then the problem lies with the teacher, not the students. We believe that putting students on the spot with constant comprehension checking is counterproductive because it may raise student anxiety and certainly will break the flow of the storytelling itself. In practice, we have found that teachers can, in fact, get a good sense of how well students are comprehending from nonverbal clues, even in large classes of 35 or 40 students.

TPR storytelling, as developed by Seely and Ray, has been one of the most important advances in language pedagogy of recent years, and we applaud them for their creativity and insight. We believe that the narrative approach builds upon those insights in making beginning language teaching even more effective—and enjoyable—for all students.

References

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