

Teaching Narrative Paragraphs Using Authentic Materials : An Alternative

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Abstrak

Secara umum, pengajaran ketrampilan menulis selalu membutuhkan waktu panjang agar sampai pada tujuan yang ditentukan. Dilihat dari proses penulisannya, ketrampilan ini melibatkan berbagai aspek bahasa lain sehingga seringkali dianggap sebagai ketrampilan berbahasa yang paling sulit untuk dikuasai. Artikel ini difokuskan pada pemberian alternatif terhadap pengajaran menulis di tingkat universitas dengan memanfaatkan materi yang bersifat otentik. Para dosen dapat memanfaatkan materi kuliah lain (novel, cerita pendek atau teks lain) sebagai bahan awal pengembangan ketrampilan menulis. Dengan demikian, untuk mengaplikasikan alternatif yang ditawarkan pada tulisan ini, kolaborasi antar dosen mulak diperlukan.

1. The Importance of Writing

In this global era in which people can possibly communicate orally with the help of a wide range of communication technology, writing skill even becomes more significant¹. There are many convincing reasons why this skill is really pertinent, but there are at least four important points to mention. First, if we have

such wonderful ideas but not well expressed in written forms it is not beneficial to any one. We rely on writing to keep our ideas permanent. If we do not write, as the more serious consequence, there will be no reading or literature which results in no knowledge and civilization. Secondly, the act of writing is an act of thinking and learning. As we write, we also learn to think at least to deliver our ideas smoothly in order that others might come to our intended messages. Thirdly, writing is a way and process of discovering meanings. The act of writing allows us to make unexpected connection among ideas and language. Problems sometimes solve themselves on the paper; the solutions come as we write about the difficulties facing us. The last but not the least, writing ability is plausibly needed by educated people. Many qualified universities only select those more capable to write effectively as they tend to have higher ability to increase their academic success². In a nutshell, writing skill becomes more pertinent to deserve our attention and motivate us to provide more effective way of learning.

The important role of writing becomes more significantly greater for any students majoring in language. It is commonly believed that writing skill involves some complicated processes and needs other language aspects. It is not surprising, then, to find out that writing courses are only given after the students have mastered, among other things, sufficient grammatical knowledge, well-used vocabulary items, and sufficient use of mechanics.

In addition, students' progress in writing always takes a long time. Mutmainnah³ showed when the students made progress it was so little that it could only be statistically detected. Such reasons might underlie the fact that writing course is commonly divided into several units offered in several semesters in order to accelerate the students' progress in their writing skill. Certain writing course is geared toward certain focus of learning which also means that the materials are sequenced based on the level of difficulty, starting from the easiest to the most complicated ones. The materials for Writing I, for example, are considered the prerequisite for Writing II. Similarly, the one for the first material of Writing III is used as 'the entry behaviour' for the following sessions, and so on.

This paper, however, focuses more on how teaching narrative paragraphs at university level, especially for Writing I course. This covers the objective of Writing I course in which writing narrative paragraphs are involved. Right after the

description of this course, some possible ways of teaching narrative writings are proposed.

2. The Objective of Teaching Writing I Course at English Department of UIIS Malang

As stated in the academic guidance⁴, Writing I course is designed to enable the students to construct good English sentences and paragraphs. The materials, which will be given include building complex sentences, compound and complex sentences which reflect certain ideas in correct punctuation and sufficient transitional signals. In addition, some activities will be devoted to develop the students' ability to compose narrative, expository, and descriptive paragraphs.

This course is weighted 2 credits, meaning that there are 16 meetings in a semester. It is clear from the description above that Writing I course is focused on both sentence construction and developing the four rhetoric modes. As it was investigated further, it was found out that, in practice, the descriptive paragraph was taught first before narration. It means that whenever the students are supposed to describe any characters or settings needed in narration, the students are considered well equipped with the sufficient background. Similarly, some aspects which are significant for writing narration like transitional expressions, time sequence as well as sequence expressions have been well acquired.

3. Some Alternatives of Teaching Narrative Paragraphs

In teaching narrative writing, at least two points should be focused more: logical well-sequenced actions and image-producing description. These are important in order that the writings have a more alive effect on the narration. One of the most important elements that must be considered in presenting an action is sequencing. Simple chronological sequencing can be best illustrated with process narrative⁵. Writer complicate the narrative sequence by referring to something happened earlier (flashback) or that will occur later (flasforward) or the combination of the two. Writers also commonly use three methods to signal shifts in narrative time : clock time, temporal transitions, and verb tense. Clock time is used to orient

the readers and to give a sense of duration. Temporal transitions show time passing by locating a point in time or relate one point to another while verb tense indicates when the actions occur and whether they are complete or in progress.

However, writers do not really try to reproduce time as a clock measures it. People experience subjectively according to their feelings, not objectively according to mechanical measurement. To create the sense of duration in narrative time, it is necessary to provide pacing or space by emphasizing more important actions and deemphasizing the less important ones. It is important to create more significant effects on these important parts so the readers might be able to grasp its role. To emphasize the sequence of actions, the writers need to exploit the most striking points, which makes the action lasts longer than seems more intense. To do this, there are two common techniques: using sentences with momentum and presenting the action through dialogues.

In providing an intense description, employing the five senses as well as perceiving the details are plausibly significant. The results of both efforts should be perfectly reflected on the use of more subtle, concise, specific and well-used dictions. In other words, the students are supposed to be able to 'paint' the object on words. In narration, the descriptions are commonly in the forms of characters having certain role in narration or any object with significant roles in action. The successful description serves more rounded pictures of the events.

Based on the above concepts and the description on teaching narration, several possible ways are proposed to have more effective class activities. The following examples make use of authentic materials from various sources. Authentic materials are strongly encouraged to bring into the class in order that the students can be exposed to more genuine use of language. This enables the students to cope successfully with the real communication outside of the class. If this happens, they will not be reluctant to use English in their daily communication.

Several points, however, should be kept in mind. First of all, necessary simplification in terms of linguistics aspects might be needed to sufficiently meet the students' need and ability. Secondly, a short introduction need to be made if the materials contain some culturally bound concepts which might hinder the students to provide well-sequenced narration. Thirdly, the students' need and interest should be taken into account. It will be more interesting if the materials can meet the

students' need and suitable with what they like best. In this case, teachers can involve them in selecting the materials.

If the students are also taking some literature courses at the same time this writing course is offered, some scenes or certain part of a short story can be made as the materials on this subject. If it can be done, collaboration with the other teachers is unavoidably needed. In addition, in developing image-producing descriptions, class activities are directed more toward describing setting of a sequence of events rather than describing objects as the last is properly done in descriptive paragraph. If certain part of a novel or a short story is taken, however, some modifications should be made to accommodate the students' language competence. Below are the detailed descriptions.

(1) Ways of Obtaining Image-producing Image Description

In obtaining the effective image producing description, there are two things that can be done: providing fully described settings or lively-pictured characters of certain events.

a. Providing relevant settings for the conversation

Several ways can be used to elicit the students' skill in producing vivid description. One of them is by providing the students any conversation as the context and asking them to give the relevant setting for the given conversation. This activity can be very challenging as a way of developing their writing skill as well as the students' creativity and sensitivity in judging certain social phenomena. In addition, this can also develop their predicting skill which is significant in reading any literature texts. However, the context should be clearly provided in order to avoid ambiguity which results in obtaining irrelevant settings. Below is an example. This exercise is better given for gaining more free responses from the students. Whenever it is necessary, some more controlled exercises may be given to bridge the students' insufficient language competence.

Example:

Instruction : Below is the conversation between a young woman who longed very much for a child and an old witch who would help the woman to have one.

The conversation happens in the witch's house. Think of any possible objects you might find there. Describe any suitable details you might perceive in a witch's house. Use your smell, touch, sight, hearing, and your taste as well.

Woman : I have the greatest longing to have a little child of my own.
Please, help me

Witch : ah, if you want your dream to come true, take this grain of barley. It's not the kind of the peasant sows in his field or the sort you feed to chickens. Sow it in a flowerpot, tend it and just see what happens.

Woman : oh, many, many thanks.

(She cried for the happiness she might get. Soon she gave the witch a silver shilling and went home)⁶

b. Providing relevant characteristics on certain characters

In this section, the teachers may give the students several exercises which supply them wide opportunities to describe the characters based on certain contexts. It will be more interesting if the contexts are in the forms of conversations as these can function as the general picture of the characters that should be described in a more detailed one. But, be sure that the students have been well-equipped with relevant reading skills such as deducing meaning from context, getting main ideas both explicitly or implicitly stated, finding out key words, etc.

Similarly, the exercises can be designed based on previously given texts or exercises (see point 1 below), or the new one (see point 2). You will find that point 2 below can be for describing characters and setting at the same time.

Examples:

1. **Instruction** : *Read again the above conversation above. Imagine how the woman's expression after she has been given the grain. List them all together and write down to have full descriptions on the woman.*

2. **Instruction** : *Below is the conversation between Luka and Popova, the characters taken from a novel. Describe Popova's characteristics*

using the available information you can find in the conversation. Make use of all information to have a detailed description of Popova. Of course, you may use your own words you think it more suitable and precise.

A drawing room in Popova's house, a land-owning little widow, is in deep mourning and has her eyes fixed on a photograph. Luka, her aged footman, is haranguing her.

Luka : it isn't right, madam.....you're just destroying yourself. The maid and the cook have gone off fruit picking, every living being is rejoicing, even the cat understands how to enjoy herself and walks about in the yard, catching midges; only you sit in this room all day, as if this was a convent, and don't take any pleasure. Yes, really! I reckon it's a whole year that you haven't left the house!

Popova : I shall never go out..... why should I? My life has already at an end. He is in his grave, and I have buried myself between four walls.....we are both dead.

Luka : well, there you are! Nicolai Mihailovitch is dead, well, it's the will of God, and may his souls rest in peace.....you have mourned him and quite right. But you can not go on weeping and wearing mourning forever. My old woman died, too, when her time came. Well? I grieved over her, I wept for a month, and that's not enough for her, but if I've got to weep for a whole age, well, the old woman isn't worth it (*sigh*). You've forgotten all your neighbors. You don't go anywhere, and you see nobody. We live, so to speak, like spiders, and never see the light.eh, my lady! You're young and beautiful, with roses in your check—if you only took a little pleasure.....⁷

(2) Ways of Providing Chronological Order

There are two ways of providing the students the ability to narrate the events based on the chronological order. We can make use some conversations taken from novel or short stories and use the cartoon strips as the context for the students to have narration. Below is the detailed description.

a. Paraphrasing the conversation into paragraphs

This pointy enables the students to be more aware of the importance of time sequence in a narration. By modifying a conversation into a paragraph (from direct conversation to indirect one) the students will be trained to chain one event to the others. This kind of activity will also facilitate them to have a smoother sentence connection. To obtain a more vivid narration, sufficient transitional signals should be used.

Example :

Instruction: write the following dialog into indirect sentences of a good paragraph. Use appropriate transitional expressions to relate one sentence to the others in a smooth way. Make sure that your sentences construct a unified and coherent paragraph.

John : Hero wants something. Perhaps it's the vening paper. (*he makes a movement towards it*)

Mary : listen! (*the Hero begins to tap with his feet*)

John : He's signaling something

Mary : Dots and dashes

John : that's the Morse code, that's what that is. Where's my dictionary? (*he fetches it hastily and begins to turn over the pages*)

Mary : Quick, dear!

John : (*reading*) Here we are. '1. Morse-the walrus' (*looking at the Hero*) No, that must be wrong. Ah, this is better. '2. Morse code signaling of telegraph-operators—as "He sends a good morse".⁸

b. Modifying the conversation from cartoons into indirect forms written in a paragraph

To have more varied activities, we can also make use of any cartoons available in newspapers. To make it more productive, the students are asked to modify the

dialogs into indirect forms of conversations and use sufficient transitional signals as well. For more advanced students, they might be given 'a blank cartoon' (see point 2 below) and asked them to use their own words to have the narration.

Examples:

1. Instruction : Look at the following picture and read the dialog between the two characters. Change the dialog into indirect sentences. Use any appropriate transitional expressions to create a more coherent and unified paragraph. Please, describe the two characters as detailed as possible to make your narration more alive.

2. Instruction : Look at the picture and pay more attention on the characters' facial expressions. Write a narrative paragraph based on the picture and provide a vivid description on the setting and characters. Supply appropriate transitional expressions to have a smooth chronological order.

4. Conclusion

The above are only some of many other alternatives that can be made use of by English teachers at university levels. The above examples, however, have been empirically done in my writing I classes. From my 'try-out', it was found out that my students tended to write more productively in terms of the length and the use of vocabulary items in their compositions. In addition, their paragraphs also displayed more vivid narration. To provide more convincing result, more experiments should be done.

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(Endnotes)

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Taken from Famous Fairy Tales, 1974

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Taken from

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Taken from

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