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The Technique of Personal Narrative in the EFL Classroom – Re-discovered and Newly-Applied

SUMMARY: This article is an attempt to revive the personal narrative – not as a research method, which it used to be, but rather as a teaching technique in the EFL classroom. The reason why is that students when confronted with the foreign language, in order to understand it, have to make it part of their personal experience and what better way of achieving that than letting them talk themselves into it. Unlike understanding based on logical and abstract thinking, characteristic for the mathematical model of learning, where natural phenomena are extracted from their context and put into categories, the narrative understanding is basically a process of explaining based on events in real time and place. Phenomena, events or a foreign language for that matter, can be integrated into the environment referred to as life in general. The most important advantage of the personal narrative in EFL is that students learn to understand reality in the foreign language as well, and as much, as in the native language.

Therefore, after a short overview of the personal narrative as a research method, this article will suggest applicable and implementable ways of integrating the personal narrative into the teaching methodology of EFL.

KEY WORDS: *personal narrative, experience, EFL learning, meaningfulness of language*

Social sciences and the humanities in general, including linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural research in particular, still depend largely on the rationalistic epistemology and the observational/ experimental methodology of natural sciences (Pavlenko, in Lantolf, 2000: 157). However, sociolinguistic and sociocultural research is focused on real communication in actual social, cultural and linguistic settings, which is why the experimental methodology might prove inadequate.

The personal narrative used to be a method widely applied in the humanities and then it started being marginalised. This neglect lasted for decades as scientists assumed that it was not legitimate enough being based on personal opinion and not on scientific data (unlike Peirce, 1995; Polanyi, 1995; Siegal, 1995 & 1996 and Norton, 1997, who never stopped believing in the justifiable application of the personal narrative).

There seem to be two main reasons why the personal narrative was suddenly marginalised. First, it is generally assumed that in the discursive space referred to as science, the personal narrative (PN) is less reliable and less valid than the observation/ experimental (O/E). It is assumed that the PN is more like an 'anecdote' giving it thus a dimension of interesting account rather than a scientific report. Therefore, it was

dismissed as potentially incomplete, even fallible, except in cases when the narrative was delivered by the scientist (though even their accounts were not always accredited the necessary legitimacy). The second reason for the marginalisation of the PN may be recognised in the century-long fascination with the achievements of the O/E in the hard sciences. A more or less normal conclusion was that even cultural research might be based on the model provided by the hard sciences (Rorty, 1979: 367). What the classic O/E seems to be missing is the subjective experience related to social phenomena because „the ontology of the mental is an irreducibly first-person ontology-"(Searle, 1992: 95). The personal experience of the physical world and its phenomena within the field of sociolinguistic research is of essential importance because it is a much more abundant and relevant source of data than the distilled method of the O/E.

A general definition of the personal narrative was provided by Shore (1996) who says that it is a system of verbal formulas which are conventional or personal and which are continuously used by people to understand the reality they are living in. What is more, by means of narration "experience is literally talked into meaningfulness", while at the same time "the strange and the familiar achieve a working relationship" (Shore, 1996: 58). Understanding based on the logical and mathematical model depends on rules and patterns according to which natural phenomena are ripped out of their context and put into categories. Unlike that, narrative understanding is actually a process of explaining based on events in real time and in a real place so that they can be integrated into the framework or the environment regarded as life in general (Polkinghorne, 1988: 21). Furthermore, the narrative explanation, unlike the logical and mathematical explanation, is retroactive because it tackles the dilemmas referring to events in accordance with the consequences of the event. Thus, the narrative explanation is in fact a reconstruction, which imposes the conclusion that the narrative cannot be anything but that since the results, and the consequences of the narrative are unknown until the moment the event it refers to has actually happened (Polkinghorne, 1988: 27).

The narrative genre and the personal narrative are now more respected in psychology, sociology, sociolinguistics and anthropology. The narrative is now considered a legitimate and abundant source of information for various types of research including the influence of cultural artefacts on the study of a foreign language (Kramsch, 1996; Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Johnstone, 1996). This is not to imply that the personal narrative should replace observational and experimental research but to show that certain aspects of human activity, including the learning of a foreign language can be explained much easier if actually explained.

Since the personal narrative is actually an explanation offered in the first person singular, when supposed to be applied in a classroom it may be implemented both in written and oral form.

The oral form is a very popular method as it offers the hands-on approach the teacher favours in the classroom. In fact, the student talks and the teacher evaluates.

What better and easier way than that. Somebody might say that this has actually been an almost century-long and normal way of testing and assessing students' knowledge. However, the personal narrative does not imply that the teacher enters the classroom, sits down at the desk, opens the record book, calls out a student's name, starts asking questions about last week's units and then expects the student to trigger their memory and start reciting everything they know, relevant or not. Quite contrary to that.

The personal narrative is supposed to be implemented in particular contexts only, the most obvious one being a classroom where students of diverse cultural backgrounds[1] have to understand a topic, such as family life in English language environments, the school system in them or social matters, political themes, etc. In such a classroom, it may be of utmost importance to ask for personal understanding and thus personal experience as a referential basis for units dealing with cultural matters, lessons created to further critical thinking among students or classes devoted to the discussion of cultural topics in general.

The teacher can thus come to class, not just sit down at the desk and simply start teaching a unit on holidays celebrated in English speaking countries. However, what the teacher can do is ask students to say what they know about the holidays, make comparisons to holidays celebrated in their culture, express personal attitudes regarding modern trends in accepting certain traditions from another culture, etc. It may come as a surprise what the students have to say. Alternatively, the unit may be about the does and don'ts in business situations in the UK for instance. The personal narrative may prove valuable not only as an assessment technique but also as a tool furthering mutual understanding and tolerance among various cultures because the students learn about differences as being part of a personal identity. In such a situation, the impact of sharing personal experiences may be of crucial importance for the general level of motivation in the classroom leading to much better results.

Sometimes, however, time is an issue not easily resolved. Not every class may offer enough time to implement the personal narrative. If the class consists of 30 students, a normal number of students in most EFL classrooms, the teacher can hardly have every single student say something. At least not enough to gain insight into their personal attitude let alone assess their performance. In addition to that, not every student

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[1] English as a foreign language is usually taught in countries, which may not be considered monolingual and monocultural, that is students, though using one language as their native language, may be from different cultural backgrounds because they belong to different nationalities living in one particular country comprising one speech community. What is more, they may belong to different cultural subgroups characterised by particularities distinctive to those groups only and yet part of the larger culture. This means that their personal experience might not include any of the topics being studied or discussed in the EFL classroom. Finally, the linguistic competence and performance in the target language depend upon the understanding of the content and material used in class, which stresses the importance of the personal narrative as a technique to be implemented so that the teacher may assess and evaluate the level of understanding and comprehension. For further details regarding multicultural classrooms and EFL, refer to Đorđević 2005, 2006, 2008 & 2009.

likes sharing personal opinions nor does every student feel confident enough to speak in English so as to prove how well they can use it in normal communication. In such cases, the personal narrative can be introduced in the form of a written assignment where the students are asked to write about what they think and what their attitude to some matter is. In that way the teacher has legitimate grounds for proper assessment which does not evaluate the communicative competence but at least shows how much of the lesson the students have learned and what the common mistakes are.

The next section is an attempt to illustrate the practical implementation of the personal narrative in class in both oral and written form[2].

There are many different topics and themes that may be realised based on the personal narrative. However, the volume of this article imposes certain limitations, which is why only one very popular topic presented in fiction written in English[3] and mentioned in secondary school EFL textbooks shall be illustrated – the phenomenon of the Mall in the USA or the shopping centre (shopping precinct) in the UK. Suffice it to say that this topic reflects a way of life that is slowly being transferred into other cultures. Teenagers all over the world admire the 'mall inhabitants', especially the American ones, for the fun they seem to be having while strolling through the boutiques, watching films, having coffee with friends, eating and obviously having a great time all at once and all in one place with a single credit card (which by the way, when presented in the popular American teenage films, seem to have no credit limit!).

The following three sections shall illustrate a possible class procedure based on the topic of the mall.

If the textbook used in class is just illustrating the concept of the mall or referring to it only indirectly, the teacher can find a lot of material on the internet[4]. Even a short text illustrating the essence of shopping habits and shopping centres may be enough.

e.g. The following text was used in a PhD thesis based on the personal narrative in the multicultural classrooms in the south of Serbia. (Đorđević, 2008 & 2009).

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[2] The personal narrative has been tested in actual classroom conditions for several years. For further details regarding the particular classrooms, students, lessons, results and conclusions, refer to Đorđević, 2008 & 2009.

[3] Popular fiction includes the following list: Bagwell, James. *Mall Murder. Bangor*, Maine: Booklocker, 2004.; Bogasian, Eric. *Mall: A Novel.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.; Brenchley, Chaz. *Mall Time.* Trafalgar Square, 1992.; Busselle, Donald. *The Enchanted Mall and Other Stories.* North Pomfret, Vt.: Writers Club, 2000.; Hebert, Ernest. *Wisper My Name.* New York: Penguin, 1985.; Huff, Tanya. *Long Hot Summoning.* New York: Daw, 2003.; Pearson, Ridley. *The Seizing of Yankee Green Mall: A Novel.* New York: St. Martins, 1987.; Somotow, S. P. *The Ultimate Mallworld.* Atlanta: Meisha Merlin, 2000.; Sucharitkal, Sumtow. *Mallworld.* New York: Tom Doherty, 1984. (First published 1981).

[4] For instance: http://nutmeg.easternct.edu/~pocock/Malls.htm.

A **shopping mall** or **shopping centre** is a building or set of buildings that contain a variety of *retail* units, that is stores as they are called in the USA. Throughout the mall there are interconnecting *walkways* enabling visitors to easily walk from unit to unit. In North America, the term shopping mall is usually applied to *enclosed* retail structures (and may be abbreviated to simply mall) while shopping centre usually refers to open-air retail complexes. Shopping centres in the United Kingdom are referred to as "shopping *precincts*" or just "precincts", but with American-style centres becoming more common in the UK, they are increasingly being referred to as "malls". For example, Mall of America® is one of the most visited tourist destinations in the world. The Mall is said to feature something for everyone because it offers a wide range of articles in its 520 stores. Furthermore, there are about 50 restaurants and attractions *galore* providing the whole family with a huge range of different entertainment facilities. Among other attractions there is an amusement park, featuring more than 30 remarkable rides; the **Aquarium** is the largest underground aquarium in the country; at the **NASCAR Silicon Motor Speedway** one can drive 200 mph; the **A.C.E.S. Flight Simulator** offers a one-time flying experience and at **LEGO**® children and adults can make their dream creations come true. Even smaller not so *remarkable* malls offer many of the above-mentioned possibilities. The point is to have the whole family entertain themselves while shopping.

Teenagers in America like going to the mall in search for entertainment and fun. They enjoy the different *facilities* and make use of the *convenience* that everything they like to do can be found under one roof. Coffee shops, diners, cinemas, boutiques, arcade games, etc. are but some of the possible gathering places. Parents, on the other hand, take advantage of the fact that their children are safer at the mall than in the streets which is why they allow their children to spend their spare time there. In the UK, malls are becoming more and more popular and the American style is spreading. The size of the malls, as they are called now, is not always the same as in the USA, but the main idea is being incorporated as well. While shopping for *groceries* and household items, families can have fun.

Another dominant thing related to the malls both in the US and the UK is the fact that shopping is largely based on credit cards. Young and old alike, no longer take wallets with cash when going shopping. All they need is a *substantial* credit limit on their credit account and the fun can begin. Teenagers make *ample* use of this convenience since their parents only rarely decide to control their spendings. Kids spend as long as there is money left. Again, parents find this convenient since their children are less dependable so that the parents can concentrate on work.

To conclude, the mall was originally designed to make everyday *chores* easier; however, contemporary life proves that these covered and closed places are greatly *affecting* especially young people making them more consumer orientated.

Glossary:

retail - the selling of goods to the public, usually through shops / stores

walkway - a passage or path for walking along, often outside and raised above the ground

enclosed - with walls, etc. all around

precinct - a commercial area in a town where cars cannot go

galore - in large quantities

remarkable - unusual or surprising in a way that causes people to take notice

facilities - buildings, services, equipment, etc. that are provided for a particular purpose

convenience – sth that is useful and can make things easier or quicker to do, or more comfortable

groceries - food and other goods sold by a grocer or at a supermarket

substantial - large in amount, value or importance

ample - enough or more than enough

chores - tasks that you do regularly

affect - to produce a change in sb/sth

manner - the way that sth is done or happens

strolling - to walk somewhere in a slow relaxed way

abundance - a large quantity that is more than enough

competitive - as good as or better than others

interest rates - the extra money that you pay back when you borrow money or that you receive when you invest money

debt - an amount of money that you have to pay back to sb

pedestrian zone – a street or area in a town where cars cannot be driven

clinging – hold on to sb/ sth, not letting go of sb/ sth

The teacher can start by asking questions so as to check what the students already know about the topic.

e.g.

1. Why is shopping so important in the English speaking world?
2. Is shopping considered important in Serbia?
3. How much time do people in the UK and in the USA spend on shopping?
4. Do the Serbs invest their spare time into shopping?
5. Why are teenagers in the USA and the UK becoming so focused on money?
6. Why do the Serbs envy people in the UK and the USA?

This step may be regarded as a motivational step to let the students warm up for the procedure, especially in a group that is not normally used to speaking in class. Nevertheless, there is a second, for the teacher a more valuable purpose for this step

– gaining insight into the general communicative competence of the students. The teacher may even make some mental comments about some of the students, either good or bad ones.

The next step should be the presentation of new vocabulary. In the example provided here, the glossary has been added to the text so as to save time. Of course, the old-fashioned way of putting the new vocabulary on the board is also applicable; less economical, though. The important thing is that it is discussed. The teacher must make sure all the students understand not only the meaning but also the contextual implications of the word. Therefore, the teacher can also gain insight into the general cultural knowledge as well as some first impressions about their attitudes to consumerism, shopping, malls in general, etc.

What should follow is the actual presentation of the text. There are many different approaches to this probably most classical teaching technique. Whatever approach the teacher might prefer, the key issue at this point is not to just read the text. The sole purpose of reading is to trigger understanding and comprehension and to achieve that, the teacher must check on the students constantly. This means that the teacher has to make sure the students know what it is they are reading, do they understand the entire context, can they make sense out of it, are they able to infer conclusions from it and do they have the appropriate level of understanding and comprehension to reflect upon the text critically.

In order to make sure that the previously mentioned applies, the teacher can interrupt the reader, if a student is reading, or pause, if the teacher is reading, and explain the paragraph, some phrase, ask additional questions, ask students to offer illustrations, to add opinions on certain issues, etc. Somebody might disagree and say that the text will lose on structure and unity if cut like this. However, a point in favour of this is to say that the text can be read once more at the end of the class so as to provide the sense of unity, coherence and cohesion.

When the entire text has been read, the teacher should encourage the students to add opinions about the topic and discuss it further; however, a more effective way would be to link the text to their personal experiences and have them offer some personal narrative regarding the issues discussed. Some of the possible trigger questions might be:

1. In what sense are the shopping habits different in the English-speaking world in comparison to Serbia?
2. Is shopping somehow alienating people from one another?
3. Are the Serbs really the kind of people to become conditioned shoppers?

These questions, and some others heading into the more or less similar direction, will most certainly help the students in presenting their own opinions, that is, providing their own personal narrative.

If properly planned and implemented in accordance with a clearly set time sche-

dule, the teacher should have time for some comprehension activities. Again, there are many different ways of checking on students' comprehension skills. One of them is the easy-to-implement 'True/ False'. In reference to the text supplied in this article, the following statements might be used:

1. Throughout a mall there are interconnecting *walkways* enabling visitors to easily walk from shop to shop.
2. Smaller not so *remarkable* malls do not offer many of the above-mentioned possibilities.
3. Parents take advantage of the fact that their children are safer at the mall than in the streets, which is why they allow their children to spend their spare time there.
4. What people need today is a *substantial* credit limit on their credit account and the fun can begin.
5. Contemporary life proves that malls are greatly *affecting* especially young people making them more consumer orientated.

The last but not least task that the students should be asked to do is write a short report on what they have learned. If there is at least 10 minutes left at the end of the class, the students can do it in class. If, however, there is not that much time left, the students may do it at home. The teacher can supply a heading for the report so as to make sure that the students are actually going to cover the topic done in class. One heading might be, for instance "The importance of shopping "or simply "Shopping". What is important is that the students are given a chance to write what they think without being told to do so. If the teacher tells them to write what they think, some of the students will be discouraged because of lack of opinion, courage, interest, etc. Not that this risk may be eliminated by some more neutral title, but at least the students will not feel coerced into some opinion.

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Obviously, the personal narrative can provide appropriate insight into student performance and it is not a method that involves complicated syllabus adjustments, a thing normally dreaded by most teachers. All it asks for is a small amount of personal engagement on behalf of the teacher in order to motivate students to express their own opinions. A common benefit is that classes coloured by the personal narrative shall be less boring and more rewarding for both the students and the teacher.

In one word, the personal narrative may be an officially approved type of chitchat in class that will actually have an educational purpose – it will teach the students to communicate in English.

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Техника нарације у првом лицу у учионици енглеског језика – поново откривена или изнова примењена

Резиме: Овај чланак је покушај да се поново открије нарација у првом лицу – не као метода у истраживању, већ као наставна техника у учионици енглеског језика. Разлог за то је да када се студенти суоче са страним језиком, да би га разумели, имају потребу да га претворе у своје лично искуство. Који је бољи начин да се то постигне ако не да се разговором о томе сами у то увере. За разлику од разумевања које је засновано на логичном и апстрактном мишљењу, карактеристично за математички модел учења, где се природне појаве чупају из контекста и смештају у категорије, наративно разумевање је у основи процес објашњавања на основу реалних догађаја. Појаве, догађаји или страни језик могу се интегрисати у окружење које у општем смислу зовемо живот. Најизраженија предност нарације у првом лицу у настави енглеског језика као страног јесте да ученици науче да и на страном језику разумеју исто онолико колико и на матерњем. Стога, након краћег осврта на нарацију у првом лицу као методу у истраживању, у овом чланку биће понуђени применљиви и употребљиви начини за интеграцију нарације у првом лицу у методологију наставе енглеског језика као страног.

КЉУЧНЕ РЕЧИ: *нарација у првом лицу, искуство, учење енглеског језика као страног, значење језика*