

Seed Stories as a Way of Practicing Grammar in Context

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着想を与え、そこから物語を完成させる練習は学生が文法上の知識を書いたり話したりして実践するための効果的手段になり得るが、談話スタイルに関わる事項の紹介や補強に使うこともできる。講義やそこで課せられた文献の内容を使えば、その知識や語彙を再利用できる。授業者が着想を構成できるのは学生が論理的で自然に物語を完成すべく所定の構造や知識を使用する場合である。フィードバックを提供する過程が狙っているのは学生主体による相互間の訂正、テキスト編集と会話に焦点をあてた活動を目的とした創造的機会の設定による練習効果である。

The use of seed stories, a story completion exercise can be an effective vehicle for students to practice transferring grammatical knowledge to writing and speaking. At the same time seed stories can be used to introduce and reinforce elements of narrative style. By making use of content from class lectures and readings, information and vocabulary from these class activities can be recycled. The instructor can construct the seed story in a way that obligates the students to use certain structures and information in order to complete the story in a logical and natural way. The process of offering feedback extends the utility of the exercise by creating opportunities for student-centered peer-correction, text-editing and focused conversational activities.

The Problem

Like many teachers of foreign languages in Japan, I have noted that my students do not consistently transfer knowledge and skills gained and practiced in written and oral grammar exercises to their writing or speaking tasks. To the students, the manipulation of grammar appears to be like a puzzle to be solved, moving parts from here to there, changing the forms of words, cutting a bit over here and adding a bit over there in order to successfully complete an exercise and get a desired grade. There doesn't seem to be much of an awareness of the fact that the grammar work they do is intended as a build-up to the higher goal of communicating in a natural and understandable way. Apparently, to Japanese students, grammar study done at any level of their formal education is a discrete goal in and of itself, separate from expressing ideas in written or spoken form. Academics looking critically at this phenomenon lay blame on the over-emphasis of study for the purpose of passing examinations and obtaining certification, which seem to be the primary goals of education in Japan.

Because it is used merely for testing, knowledge is sliced, disconnected, disjointed, stored, packaged for rapid retrieval, and abstracted from immediate experience. Consequently, knowledge loses its meaning as a body of information that points to something beyond itself...(McVeigh, 2002, p. 87)

Since I have insufficient patience to sit around watching my students blithely ignore this essential connection between knowledge of aspects of linguistic skills and their application, I saw I needed to develop a way of requiring them to make the connection between skills practiced in exercises and their active application in the contexts of writing and speaking tasks.

The Solution

In order to put the practice of usage of selected grammatical structures into a context and stimulate transference of grammar know-how into paragraph length

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writing, I started to employ something I like to call the "seed story." A seed story is basically a story completion exercise that is generally two to three sentences in length and introduces expository elements of a brief narrative. It is a useful way of introducing and reinforcing the basics of narrative form as used in English. Story completion as a technique shows up now and then within materials and texts used by language teachers, but tailoring it to a very specific grammar structure and to a specific group of learners can render this time-honored technique into a powerful tool for teachers.

The basic structure of the activity is the following:

A situation and protagonist(s) are introduced.



Action is brought to a climax or turning point.



The story is left hanging, to be finished by students.

The situation and time frame are conceived in such a way as to necessitate the use of a target grammar structure and the few sentences included in the seed story are laced with examples of the target structure used in context. The creative aspect of the practice is motivating, and personalizing the story by using people or situations known to members of the class introduces further possibilities for narrative fun.

Construction of Seed Stories

Constructing a seed story begins with the choice of a grammatical structure, or a set of structures that a teacher wants to reinforce in a narrative context. In the past I've had as foci a variety of verb tenses, adverbs of time, adjectives, gerunds and infinitives, phrasal verbs, irregular verbs and others. Let me describe one example in detail. One particular focus among those included in the most recent text-based course I taught on grammar was a short section on stative verbs (Azar, 1999, p. 15). I created seed story exercises on these verbs for two reasons. First, I did not believe that the text exercises would obligate the students to practice using stative verbs to the extent that they would be able to express ideas that necessitate their inclusion. Second, the text practice would not be enough to help them remember that there are various states related to each verb. Therefore, I created the following handout.

Focus on Stative Verbs (See Azar, 1999, p. 15)

Directions: Complete this narrative and use ten stative verbs of different kinds.

- _____ 2 verbs from the mental state
- _____ 2 verbs from the emotional state
- _____ 1 verb from the possession state
- _____ 2 verbs from the sense state
- _____ 3 verbs from the other existing states

Every time Chris begins his English 1 lesson, he *believes* his students have done their homework. He *appreciates* it when they do good work, but he *dislikes* it when they don't. This week he will be *surprised* because

This layout has proven to be fairly convenient and easy to use. In addition to the title, the directions, and its reference to a previous text exercise or lecture, the number and kinds of each of the categories of verbs are clearly stipulated. Blanks are provided next to the phrases included in the list of target structures to give students places to check off the instances of their use of each of the verbs, and provide the instructor with a quick way to check on the students' completion. The seed story is kept short enough to be read and, if necessary, discussed quickly and easily, but long enough to adequately introduce a situation and its characters and to bring whatever narrative there is to a jumping-off point. It is designed to offer just enough representative examples of usage of the target structure to show students once again how the structure looks in context, "just enough" being a matter of judgment on the part of the instructor. Target structures in the exercise are highlighted to make them obvious to students. The area below the seed story can be lined to provide students with a convenient space to write their continuation of the story, though sometimes I ask students to submit their writing electronically by email.

As I stated previously, the story itself needs to describe a situation that's conducive to the use of the target structures. The example above focuses on my feelings about and responses to the students' performance in class, or lack thereof, depending on which direction a given student decides to take the story. This is effective in inducing students to continue to practice using stative verbs. They must do so in order to continue to talk about my feelings and thoughts in response to their actions in the story. While this example narrative is only related to the students' performance in my class, this manner of reinforcement of specific grammatical structures can directly support discourse related to tasks in other classes. For example, Debra Occhi (2003, this volume) discusses the utility of the past perfect tense in conjunction with modals when interpreting data related to anthropological study of ancient cultures and peoples. Descriptions of day-to-day life in past or present-day cultures, a mainstay of anthropological studies, can and often do take a narrative form. The narrative seed story format could be readily adapted to not only reinforce effective use of the past perfect verb tense, but also recycle content presented in the anthropology course readings and lectures. Instructors in other fields utilizing discussion in a narrative form can adapt seed stories to suit their needs as well.

As an expansion of this exercise, I ask students to produce their own seed stories to be completed by their classmates. This helps them think more deeply about how and why the chosen grammar structures are used effectively. It is also particularly relevant for students in the English Teacher Certification track to experience devising exercises for their own future students. Examples of seed stories written by students to practice using stative verbs are included below.

Example of a student generated seed story (1st and 2nd drafts)

I like the last year's classmates. I think everyone had kindness and cooperative. Especially, I was good friends with about ten boys and girls. I like them very much. Now, each of us go to different colleges, but they will return to our hometown this summer vacation. So we made plans to...

After listening to my written and oral comments and making some corrections, the student's seed story looked like this:

I like the last year's classmates. I think everyone was kind and cooperative. Especially, I was good friends with about ten boys and girls. I like them very much. Now, each of us goes to different colleges, but they will return to our hometown this summer vacation. So we made plans to...

At this point, this story and others like it were assigned to other students for completion as homework. Some examples of completions of this particular story are included here.

Examples of responses to the above student generated seed story (1st drafts):

Example 1

... go to Okinawa. We had never been to Okinawa and we love hot weather. we dislike cold weather. And I heard Okinawa's foods taste good. Sometime I image this trip, I feel very happy. I'm looking forward to seeing my friends and going to Okinawa.

Example 2

... meet each other. When I thought about my schedule for summer I realized that I applied to seven-eleven for a job. Therefore, I can't go back to my hometown. When I talked about it, my friends felt sad because we can't see each other but they told me that they don't mind. From this moment I started to like them more than before. I am so glad that it wasn't a big matter for all of us and I'm looking forward to see all of my friends in next time.

Since these examples are first drafts, there may well be some opportunity for further rewriting. The salient point to keep in mind here is that in the examples included above, production of the target grammar structure in both the beginning seed story and the completions produced by other students is subsumed into the larger task of successfully completing a narrative. Transfer of the ability to reproduce a given structure to the larger, much more integrated task of manipulating the target structure for communicative purposes is inherent in the design. Students, whether or not they are consciously aware of it, are transferring their skills from the closed knowledge situation of discreet point grammar exercises to the open knowledge situation of discourse (McVeigh, 2002).

Correction and Feedback

Offering feedback on the students' completed seed stories continues the learning process in ways that are as important in terms of exercising editing skills as the grammar work within the writing. The correction method I've used most frequently with the seed stories has been peer correction. I have found this method offers not only some of the best opportunities for developing the judgment necessary for editing, but provides opportunities for students in developing their own classroom management skills, as well as fostering in students a sense of being in control of their own learning by taking the role of instructor, or at least facilitator. Beyond the numerous and well-documented advantages of using a learner-centered approach to evaluation of students' own work (Nunan, 1988), there is particular value in this correction method for students in the English Teacher Certification track. For them, this method affords the advantages of repeated opportunities to experience guiding a group of learners through a set of tasks, coping with the nervousness inherent in public speaking situations, monitoring time management,

as well as developing activities that require students to further exercise their judgment and stimulate a process of questioning within students' own minds.

Briefly described, my method for peer correction has been to first model the correction method for the students several times until they get used to the role of respondent, and then putting one or two students at a time into the role of activity facilitator. Selected student work is put on both OHP transparencies and paper copies distributed to all class members. The number of selections can be limited to a few representative examples so as to keep the exercise brief and avoid tediousness. Using colored pens, problems within the student-generated portion of the completed seed story are pointed out by the student facilitator after prior consultation with the instructor. During these presentations students elicit ideas by saying something along the lines of, "There's a problem here, NAME OF STUDENT. What should I do to correct it?" More often than not students will be able to say how a given grammar or spelling problem should be corrected. How the students express their ideas concerning correction is another opportunity to model and practice naturalistic conversation and reinforce confidence and fluency. Corrections as offered by the instructor or members of the class are written onto the OHP transparency. At the same time students write the corrections into their paper copies of the writing selections. This keeps them actively engaged in the process even when they are not part of the immediate dialog.

After the instructor models this method a few times, students can be chosen or asked to volunteer to take on the role of facilitator. They need to be given some time to go over a writing selection to find what problems may exist; think about how to handle them; consult the instructor on those problems they don't know how to handle; and then take on the role of facilitator themselves. Once students accept the role of facilitator, the instructor remains engaged in the process by monitoring the facilitators and intervening when necessary to keep the activity moving, or to explain those problems or questions that arise that are beyond the ability of the student facilitators to cope with.

Conclusion

Seed stories offer the advantage of affecting transfer of knowledge of grammar structures to actual application in student writing along with the corollary benefits of introducing and reinforcing elements of narrative style (barely touched on here). Additionally, working with students in generating, completing, and correcting seed stories stimulates conversation between the instructor and students, and more importantly, between the students themselves about what they are doing and how they are doing it. Creating class exercises with seed stories also provides ample opportunities for recycling information and vocabulary from class lectures and readings, stimulating creativity, facilitating evaluative processes associated with editing written work, and conferring a sense of ownership over the learning process within students. Finally, creating seed stories and peer correcting them offer opportunities for English Teaching Certification students to practice materials development and classroom management techniques. These are the advantages of seed stories that I have experienced in my courses. I recommend others to experiment with this interactive and dynamic classroom activity.

References

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