

Using narratives of personal experience in L2 oral language proficiency testing

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Abstract. Out of countless genres of oral narratives, narratives of personal experience are perhaps the most universal, common and convenient way of relating past events and memories. It is also the most fruitful source for the study of narrative discourse due to personal involvement of a narrator. Considering universality of story-telling, the use of a narrative of personal experience to assess oral language proficiency of L2 learners seems a very effective approach. The present study investigates discourse organization of L2 interviewees' responses to one particular question in an English oral language proficiency test (Video Oral Communication Instrument or VOICI) that is constructed in a form of an semi-direct video conference with the English language learners. The participants of the study are twenty-five EFL university students enrolled into English language classes in Ukraine that are divided into two groups according to their levels of L2 proficiency. The hypothesis of the study is that there is a positive linear correlation between a level of proficiency and a preference for either a strategy of a narration or a narrative. However, the results of the study, showed non-linear correlation in both proficiency groups (intermediate and advanced/ superior) between the language proficiency and a choice of a narrative or narration strategies. Both strategies were chosen by the candidates as the optimal strategies for their level of oral language proficiency. Apparently, it is easier to tell a story due to its universality than to describe in L2. The lower level testees use this knowledge as a compensation strategy, the higher ones as an efficiency strategy. The study has important implications for the methodology of L2 teaching and testing. Thus, such a non-linear correlation between the level of proficiency of the testee and his/her pragmatic and linguistic competence in a second language to frame the answers as speech acts, might suggest second language instructors to teach their students speech act theory and a theory of a narrative structure (Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Coda) in L2 classes that will be helpful for the students during their language learning and testing.

Keywords: Narrative, narration, speech act, story-telling, narratives of personal experience, discourse analysis, L2 oral testing, VOICI, oral language proficiency, oral language testing, interview, speech act theory, a theory of a narrative structure.

Introduction. Out of countless genres of oral narratives, narratives of personal experience are perhaps the most universal, common and convenient way of relating past events and memories. It is also the most fruitful source for the study of narrative discourse due to personal involvement of a narrator. It is unquestionable that one of the primary needs of mankind to understand, transform and share human experiences by means of telling stories is universal and transcends times we live in and languages we all speak. People engage in creating narratives out of their personal experiences and experiences of other people from the early days to the last. In this sense, the ability of narrating a story, a joke, or an unforgettable experience is neither a prerogative of a certain culture or language, nor of an experienced writer, poet, musician or an artist. Barthes [2], describing universality of a narrative wrote that "narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere has been a people without narrative/ Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, trans-cultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (p. 2, as cited by Abbott, [2]).

Review of Literature. The corpus of studies related to examination of narratives of personal experience of native speakers of English is extensive, it embodies more than forty years of work and a great variety of areas the researchers focused their attention on. The contribution of Labov and Waletzky [8], Labov [8], [9], [7]. for example, to the field of discourse analysis of narratives of personal experience and methodology of data collection is difficult to underestimate.

Narratives are fruitful source for the study of narrative discourse due to personal involvement of a narrator who

usually is relating a certain episode from his or her personal life that insures credibility of a narrative. Besides, as Labov and Waletzky [8] stated, "the structure of these speech events is usually clear and well defined. This definition rests upon a conception of narrative. An oral narrative of personal experience employs temporal junctures in which the surface order of the narrative clauses matches the projected order of the events described" (p.1 as cited by Labov [9]).

In general, the format of an interview is a very interesting area for the study of discourse of the subjects' responses. If asked correctly, questions about dramatic experiences in one's life elicit narratives of a personal experience with the native speakers of English in the context of an interview. Considering the universality and international nature of story telling, it might be possible that the same or a very similar question would elicit a story from a second language speaker in the context of an oral proficiency interview in English.

Extensive research has been done in the field of examination of an interviewer and interviewee language discourse in various direct oral language interviews. These studies include a wide range of different methods of analysis and approaches to the language discourse in oral language testing, using Oral Proficiency Interviews and a variety of participants. These studies focused on various aspects of interplay of oral language testing and discourse analysis such as examination of socio-linguistic, pragmatic and discourse organization of language proficiency interviews (Davies [3]); a study of discourse domains and their effects on performance (Douglas and Selinker, [4]), examination of the nature of a discourse genre of the oral proficiency interview and its relation to the natural conversation (Johnson and Tyler, [7]), topic framing and var-

ious types of accommodation by interviewers (Ross, [11]; Ross and Berwick, [12]), interpretation of L1 pragmatic system in L2 frame (Ross, [13]), framing the oral proficiency interview as a speech event and examination of interviewer and interviewee's questions (Moder and Halleck, [10]), negotiation of meaning in oral proficiency interviews, elaboration of responses by interviewees (He, [6]), management of communication problems (Egbert, [5]) and many others.

Research question. Very few studies have been done with such a semi- direct video oral proficiency test as the VOCI (Video Oral Communication Instrument) [14]. Moreover, no studies of the interviewees' responses to the interviewer's questions in the context of VOCI test examined in terms of discourse analysis of the subject's responses had ever been done with students of ESL in Ukraine.

The current study focused on the discourse organization of interviewees' responses to one particular question in a VOCI test, namely: an unforgettable experience in an interviewee's life which according to ACTFL Guidelines [1] is an advanced level question which is supposed to elicit narration in the past tense. Though the genre of the oral language interview itself indeed could not be classified as a natural conversation, some of the questions in this particular instrument (VOCI) [14] are framed as speech acts and obey some of the basic principles of a conversation: structural organization, involvement, mutual contribution and turn taking. These questions might contextually orient the candidates to contribute in their answers not simply by providing certain information as a part of an answer to a test question, but by producing a piece of a coherent conversational discourse that could be viewed as a speech act, in our case, a narrative of personal experience. I hypothesized that there is a positive correlation between a level of proficiency and a preference for either a strategy of narration or a narrative.

Method. The data for this study were collected in Ukraine. The participants were twenty-five EFL university students enrolled into English language classes. They took a timed version of a semi direct video- mediated VOCI (Visual Oral Communication Instrument) that is aimed at assessing their oral proficiency in English. Each participant spent 45 minutes answering 34 questions on the VOCI. Then each of the 25 interviews were rated and assigned the levels of oral proficiency according to the ACTFL Guidelines [1]. Twelve interviews were selected out of a larger group of data for this study. The criterion of selection was the levels of proficiency of the interviewees. The interviews were divided into two groups (6 interviews in each group): a lower (intermediate) and higher (advanced/superior) group. The interviews were transcribed and the discourse of the responses to the question about an unforgettable experience was analyzed in terms of discourse analysis. To protect the identity of the participants, each interview was given a numerical code.

Results. The discourse organization of the responses to the question about an unforgettable experience across different levels of language proficiency (intermediate group vs. advanced/ superior level group) in the timed version of the test revealed the following results.

In the intermediate group the candidates clearly dis-

played preferences for two strategies to address the unforgettable experience question: narration and a narrative. These two strategies are not chosen by the candidates randomly, but are closely related to the level of language proficiency of the candidates even within one intermediate group. Thus, all six interviews rated intermediate analyzed in this group were rank ordered. In the course of discourse analysis, it became clear that though all six responses had a partial or minimal intelligibility and task fulfillment in this question, the three candidates who had lower rankings chose a strategy to narrate a story about an unforgettable experience in their past, while three other candidates ranked slightly higher, chose a strategy to describe a past memory producing a narration in the past not a narrative. Having analyzed the discourse of all responses we hypothesized that a structure of a minimal narrative for the lower ranked intermediate level candidates might have served as a compensatory strategy for the strain of linguistic expression due to an extremely concise nature of the minimal narrative structure. However, unless the subjects are interviewed after the test about their intentions and choices either to tell a narrative or produce a narration in the past, this generalization could not be empirically supported.

With three candidates of the intermediate level who chose a strategy to describe rather than tell a story we suggest that their avoidance of telling a story might be partially accounted by the time constraint and partially by the linguistic constraint. Unlike advanced level speakers in the next group who chose to tell a story, none of the intermediate level speakers even those who constructed a narrative did a very effective job.

The analysis of the discourse organization of the responses to the unforgettable experience question in the advanced/ superior group showed a very similar pattern of distribution of two strategies: narration and a narrative. Thus, out of six analyzed responses, all three advanced candidates chose to tell a story, all superior level candidates (three) chose a strategy of narration/description of a past memory. Though the pattern seemingly mirrors that of an intermediate group, the execution of the strategies and the underlying reasoning for the choice of either one of the strategies is quite different in this group that became apparent from the discourse analysis of the responses. Thus, advanced level candidates chose to narrate a story because they have the language means to do so and interest to tell a story in the context of a language interview. The structural complexity of their narratives is much higher than that of the intermediate speakers. Advanced level candidates not only use a more complex and extended narrative structure, they incorporate external and internal evaluations in their narratives. Besides, they form their responses as speech acts of narrating a personal experience story and participate in the discussion of the question with the interviewers framing their responses as a turn in a conversation. Finally, they use descriptions in almost all parts of their narratives producing a sort of a hybrid between a narration and a narrative.

In contrast to advanced level candidates in the second analyzed group, all three superior speakers did not choose to tell a story, but unanimously preferred to use a strategy of narration that they executed with rich, diverse and sophisticated vocabulary. The underlying reasoning of the

superior candidates not to tell a story in the context of a timed version of an interview is that their level of language proficiency is too high and they have a pragmatic competence to interpret the context of an interview as that of eliciting not just information about their past, but actually testing their language skills. In order to produce a good story for a superior speaker the timed version of a question is too constraining a situation. Their language proficiency is too high even to make an attempt to fit their good stories in a context of a timed question. That is why they might have preferred narration as a more concise and effective means of addressing the question.

Conclusion and implications. To summarize, both proficiency groups (intermediate and advanced/ superior) showed that the connection between the language proficiency and a choice of a narrative or narration strategies has a reverse correlation not a linear one as I had expected. Considering the universality of story telling, I expected that the more proficient candidates would not lose a chance to tell their stories taking into account that fact that they are not strained by the language means. I anticipated also that the less proficient interviewees would not choose to tell their stories due to the obvious problems with linguistic expression. However, the study showed the results that go counter to my expectations.

The lower levels of proficiency candidates in both groups chose a strategy to tell a story, to frame their response to the unforgettable experience question as a speech act of relating a personal experience narrative. The candidates with higher levels of proficiency chose to frame their responses as addressing the tested language functions of description and narration. Both strategies are chosen by the candidates as the optimal strategies for their level of oral language proficiency. Apparently, it is easier to tell a story due to its universality than to describe in L2. The lower level testees use this knowledge as a compensation strategy, the higher ones as an efficiency strategy.

The study has important implications for the methodology of L2 teaching and testing. Thus, such a non-linear correlation between the level of proficiency of the testee and his/her pragmatic and linguistic competence in a second language to frame the answers as speech acts, suggest that second language instructors should teach their students speech act theory and a theory of a narrative structure (Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Evaluation, Coda) in L2 classes that will be helpful for the students during their language learning and testing. Besides telling personal stories in an English class is fun, enjoyable and rewarding.

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