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TO THE PROBLEM OF NARRATIVE AND NARRATION IN L2 ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING

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Abstract. 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 a 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 candidates use this knowledge as a compensation strategy, the higher ones as an efficiency strategy.

Key words: 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, trans-historical, transcultural: 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 various 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 VOICI 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 (VOICI) [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.

Discourse analysis of narratives in 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 tell their stories, since their level of proficiency allowed them to do so. I anticipated also that the less proficient interviewees would not choose to tell their stories due to the obvious problems with language proficiency. However, the study showed the unexpected 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 ones 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 candidates 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. The second language instructors should directly 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.

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