Situated Learning: Learn to Tell English Stories

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Abstract

For students in a perspective English teacher program, enhancing language proficiency and teaching knowledge is essential so that they can participate in the teaching community. This study investigated the acquisition of an unfamiliar discursive practice by four undergraduate students in a perspective EFL teacher training program. The practice is storytelling which is often overlooked in teacher-training programs in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context such as in Taiwan. In this study, four undergraduate students in a teacher-training program of a medium-sized university in southern Taiwan were provided an opportunity to tell stories to primary-school children. Qualitative data were collected, including students' teaching experiences and reflective journals throughout the entire project, videotapes of four storytelling rehearsals and the real storytelling episodes, and interviews. By using situated learning as the theoretical framework, this study depicts the change in the students and instructor as well as in the students' co-participation patterns by which the students moved from peripheral to fuller participation. This study provides EFL teacher educators a perspective that considers teacher training as co-constructed development in situated discursive practices.

Keywords: EFL context, Situated learning, Storytelling, Teacher training

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Students wanting to become English teachers in Taiwan not only need to enhance their language proficiency but also need to increase their teaching knowledge. Most students in pre-service teaching programs have acquired sufficient teaching knowledge, pedagogies, and skills. They also have opportunities to participate in summer or winter camps to sharpen their teaching skills. Apart from structured teaching, however, knowledge about implementing other intriguing teaching approaches to engage learners in the target language is limited. Storytelling, for example, is a way to motivate young children in their early literature experience. This approach is commonly used in primary education across the United States. However, for those Taiwanese students, also prospective English teachers, they have little knowledge about how to tell a story or about storytelling techniques.

Storytelling plays a crucial role in one's language learning acquisition as well as moral education. Researchers have shown that storytelling has many of the same literacy-related benefits. Numerous studies have pointed out that storytelling facilitates children's language learning. Tsou (2003), for example, studied the effects of storytelling and language learning at the primary school level. She found that children in the storytelling classroom had made significant progress with their English compared with those in the non-storytelling classroom (the regular classroom). Wu (2004) studied the applications of storytelling on learning Mandarin by first grade students. She found that by applying storytelling classes as part of the teaching curriculum, students were willing to share their opinions with others, to solve problems as part of a team and to deal with their emotions with other students.

Storytelling not only benefits the listeners, it also brings contribution to the storytellers' language proficiency. Egan (1995 & 1999), for example, commented that storytelling is a linguistic activity that is educative because it allows individuals to share their personal understanding with others, thereby creating negotiated transactions. Without this interactive narrative experience, humans could not express their knowledge or thoughts. This idea is also supported by Bruner (1986), who pointed out that storytelling is the part of how humans translate their individual private experiences of understanding into a public culturally negotiated form. However, it is often overlooked in teacher-training programs in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context such as Taiwan. Little is known about the experiences that teachers or those preparing to become teachers have had with storytelling. Mottely and Telfer (1997) surveyed 106 undergraduate elementary education majors about their perspective of storytelling. One section of the survey was to ask

those prospective teachers to identify their needs and concerns as potential storytellers. The prospective teachers expressed that they needed to know more about how to tell stories effectively. Mottely and Telfer concluded that if prospective teachers feel the need to learn more about storytelling, we, as educators, can work to provide more opportunities to help prospective teachers learn more about stories and storytelling.

1.2 Explore Importance of the Problem

Many prospective teachers in Taiwan view picture books as alternative textbooks. They would simply read through the story and choose some vocabulary to teach. The activities they design will also focus on practicing the vocabulary. In other words, most of the prospective teachers do not know how to "tell" a story rather than teaching it. If storytelling can benefit the pupils greatly, there seems to be a necessity to train the prospective teachers how to tell English stories. In this study, four undergraduate students in a perspective teaching program at a college in southern Taiwan were provided opportunities to tell stories to primary school children by working for a publisher. The preparation and storytelling processes and the interpersonal activities involved can be explained by the situated learning framework. Using situated learning as a framework, this paper described how the four students co-constructed the knowledge and skills necessary for storytelling as well as how they made progress from peripheral participants toward full participant status in the storytelling community.

Qualitative data were collected including students' teaching experiences and reflective journals throughout the whole project, video tapes of the teaching demonstrations and the real storytelling episodes. A total of five journals from each student were collected—four from rehearsals and one from the final storytelling event. Data were analyzed using theme-basic analytic approach. The purpose of the study is to report on how the novice learned to participate in one unfamiliar discursive practice, storytelling in this case. This study also attempts to detect whether or not there is any gain in the students' general linguistic competence in English as well as any change in the students' roles within the participation framework of practice.

1.3 Describe Relevant Scholarship

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is a social process dependent upon transactions with others placed within a context that resembles as closely as possible the practice environment (p.35). The concept behind situated learning is actually quite basic. Human existence has very rarely been one of complete isolation in which actions occur spontaneously and have no influence on subsequent actions. Thus, situated learning emphasizes cooperation and participation as the means of acquiring knowledge. Knowledge is negotiated or co-constructed through the interactions of the learner with others and the environment. Learning is implicit in the experience rather than in the subject matter structured by the instructor. Knowledge is obtained by the processes described (Lave, 1997) as "way in" and "practice." Way in is a period of observation in which a learner watches a master and makes a first attempt at solving a problem. Practice is refining and perfecting the use of acquired knowledge (p. 21).

Likewise, Lave and Wenger (1991) explain that learning is not decontextualized but occurs through a process of co-construction within the context of a social and physical environment, and, to that extent, reflects elements of unintentional socialization requiring cooperation learned through imitation. Reder et al. (1996) also proposed that learning needs to be contextualized. Because situated learning emphasizes the relationship between what is learned in the classroom and what is needed outside the classroom; therefore, activities or actions should be grounded in the concrete situation in which they may occur. Young (1993) echoes that learning should take place in the context of realistic settings. Using "authentic tasks" enables students to immerse themselves in the culture of a specific domain (p.43). By being immersed in such realistic contexts, the need to learn certain repetitive skills is made evident, thus requiring less direct explanation by the teacher.

When planning situated-learning tasks, three important components of the content need to be considered: 1) the sociocultural setting, 2) the learner's activity within that setting, and 3) the learner. In this study, the sociocultural setting refers to the setting where the preparation of demonstrations and the real storytelling took place. The person refers to practitioner in a community where people bring their perspectives, values, and beliefs to a similar interest or goal. Interactions between practitioners result in increased knowledge and skill on the part of each individual as well as a change in the discourse of the community. These changes then further contribute to the identity development of the individual. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), the identity development can be found when one moves from the state of legitimate peripheral participation to the state of full participation. Legitimate peripheral participation refers to a process in which "learners become full participants in the community of practitioners" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.35). The term peripheral participation is used to describe the peripheral role of the person in a community. Newcomers are peripheral participants compared to more experienced members of the community, that is, full participants. In other words, peripheral participant and full participant are relative positions, rather than absolute states. During the legitimate peripheral participation, a peripheral participant makes progress toward full participant status by creating learning goals,

experiencing different social situations, observing and interacting with other members, and engaging in the community (Yang, 2005).

2. Method

2.1 Learning Processes

Before the four students went to the primary school, the students had observed how a professional storyteller told a story to a group of children at the publisher's company. The students then were required to tell 2 books (A Color of His Own by Leo Lionni, and Miss Pronunciation by Jessie Huang) chosen by the publisher for their storytelling. The four students were divided into two groups. Two students would tell a story together in one hour. The reason of doing that is because these students lacked storytelling experience. Having a partner could ease their pressure and anxiety. Students had a total of 4 storytelling demonstrations before they went on the real stage. The book A Color of His Own was told first to children from ages of 4 to 7, and the other book Miss Pronunciation was told to children from ages of 7 to 12. The primary school the students went to tell the stories at was a bilingual kindergarten. The children were assumed to have sufficient English proficiency to understand the stories in English. As a result, the college students were expected to tell the stories using only English. Most of the parents would also stay to listen to the stories. The students spent about 45 minutes to tell the stories and then did some activities after the stories ended.

Before the students went to do their storytelling in the primary school, they rehearsed four times. In the first rehearsal, the students needed to submit a draft in which they would write down what they would like to say in English. During the first rehearsal, the students talked about ways to present the story, and the teacher would give them some comments and suggestions. Content accuracy was the main focus in this rehearsal. In the second rehearsal, the students needed to memorize the story and tried to present the story smoothly. The focus of the second rehearsal was to increase the students' English fluency and the flow of storytelling. Some storytelling strategies such as use of voice, facial expression, use of body language, and listening to the audience, were suggested to the students. The students then went back to make some changes and started to prepare all the necessary materials for the third rehearsal. In the third rehearsal, the students needed to tell the stories as if they would have done so in the school. Finally, in the fourth and the last rehearsal, students told the stories again with a professional storyteller observing them. She would give her comments after each group's storytelling. The series of rehearsals and the real storytelling event were videotaped. The students also wrote teaching experiences and reflective journals after the each rehearsal and the final storytelling event.

3. Results

The process of learning storytelling led the four participants to change their discursive roles over time, that is, a change from peripheral to fuller participation. Two discursive resources were used to indicate the change: (a) the organization of acts comprising the sequential organization of the practice, and (b) the system of turn-taking managed between the students and the instructor. Initially, the students relied heavily on the instruction of the instructor in both language and the organization of the story. The students declined verbal participations in the first two rehearsals. In addition, the students seldom used any English in the first rehearsal. In consequence, in the first and second rehearsals, the instructor participated more fully than the student by identifying problems in the students' language usage and the ways of telling stories. The instructor provided candid observation and direction to change. The students' participation in the stage was limited to rewriting their storytelling scripts based on the suggested changes. One student expressed how she felt when she heard the instructor's suggestion in the first rehearsal.

> 在第一次試演給老師看的時候，好緊張! 我們也知道第一次試演應該沒有辦法很順暢，的確，老師給了我們很多的指導，每當老師說一個意見時，我和 Alice 心裡總會佩服不已。(When we demonstrated to the teacher the first time, we were very nervous. We knew that the procedure may not be very smooth in our first rehearsal. Indeed, the teacher gave us many comments and suggestions. Alice and I felt astonished whenever the teacher gave us suggestions.)

This excerpt demonstrated the legitimate peripheral participation of the students in this practice. The student's peripheral participation is, perhaps, not surprising given that she had never participated in a storytelling event as one student mentioned:

> 在一開始，老師告知我們這樣的活動時，心中可是既期待又擔心，期待，是因為可以有機會到幼稚園說故事，因為一次又一次經驗的累積，對我們來說是彌足珍貴。而擔心，是因為怕自己沒有足夠時間練習，或是怕說的不好丟老師及系上的臉。(In the beginning when being told that we had a chance to participate in this activity, I was excited and worried. I was excited because from this storytelling activity, I could gain some experience. However, I was worried that I didn't have enough time to prepare and practice. I was afraid that if I didn't do it well, I would bring shame to the teacher and my department.)

Furthermore, this was the first occasion that the instructor gave advice to the students. In later rehearsals, however, the

students took a more active role by identifying problems themselves, and by making some changes without waiting for the instructor's directive to do so. In the last rehearsal, one group would comment on the other group's storytelling after the demonstration. Here is one of the comments coming from a student:

你會不知不覺中說的很快，有些問題不太清楚你想問什麼。(You gradually speed up when you tell a story. Some questions are not very clear. I don't understand what you want to ask.)

The student who was advised by other students did not feel embarrassed. Rather, she expressed her gratefulness of others' comments, saying that

很謝謝另一組的同學，我們兩組之間互相幫忙，互相給意見，也讓我學到很多。(I appreciate the other group. We help each other and give comments to each other. That makes me learn a lot.)

In addition, the students' and the instructor's roles changed over time as the instructor gradually withdrew her turn to elicit fuller responses from the students. At the same time, the students changed from uttering minimal response tokens (McCarthy, 2003) to producing complete turns. That is, in the first two rehearsals, the students' participations were limited to response tokens whereas in later rehearsals their contributions were more substantial, including suggestions for alternative ways of presenting the story. For example, in the last rehearsal, the students were able to comment on other group's storytelling before the instructor jumped in. The nonverbal behavior also demonstrated changes from peripheral to fuller participation in the practice. In the later rehearsals, for example, the students demonstrated greater ownership of the storytelling process. In the first two rehearsals, the students lacked confidence when trying to tell the stories in English. They would look at the instructor all the time to seek approval. The lack of confidence was mainly a problem with language and the ways of storytelling. The students needed to use English throughout the one-hour storytelling period. Because the audience consisted of bilingual children and parents, the students were very nervous about language use. One student expressed the frustration when preparing for the storytelling,

在準備說故事的這段期間，由於面臨了種種的困境，使我一度陷入了低潮期。(During the preparation period of time, I was going through some down periods because I faced many difficulties.)

In addition to the language use, the students did not have much experience in storytelling as mentioned previously. One student described the difficulties adapting a short story into a one-hour storytelling event.

Everything was difficult at the beginning; the biggest problem we met was to enlarge [expand] the content of [the] story. The original story only contains a few sentences or even a single word on each page. What we needed to do is to add some interesting plots and some interactive activities to expand the story into a one-hour story.

In the first rehearsal, the students would also make frequent pauses because they were not sure whether they did it "correctly." They tended to say "Teacher, we are not 100% ready yet" before they even started the rehearsal. They laughed and discussed points with each other in the middle of the rehearsal processes. In the later rehearsals, however, they expressed confidence in telling the stories. The same student expressed this after the storytelling event.

我克服了面對人群的恐懼，並且更深入的學會說故事的技巧，如何營造並且掌握故事的氣氛，以及如何和台下的小朋友們互動。(I have overcome my fear of facing the audience. I learned more about storytelling skills and how to create an atmosphere when telling a story. I also learned how to interact with the children.)

All of the students mentioned that they would love to do it again if they are provided with other chances. One student expressed how her feelings toward the preparation changed from the beginning to the end.

對我來說，說故事不是一件容易的事，尤其是說故事給小朋友，更是件不容易的事。常有人會說舞台魅力，我想當個說故事姊姊，也需要一點舞台魅力，很佩服那種站上說故事舞台，就可以馬上抓住小朋友的眼睛。希望以後有更多說故事的機會，雖然多少會有壓力，不過我想這個壓力是好的，我希望藉由一次次的說故事，讓自己有一天也成為"全方位"的說故事姊姊。(For me, storytelling is not easy. It is even harder when your audience is young children. I often hear people say stage charisma. I think in order to become a storyteller, he or she needs some stage charisma as well. I admire those who can catch children's attention as soon as they get on the stage. I hope that I can have more chances to tell stories. Even though there is pressure, I think it is a positive pressure. I hope that by doing this again and again, I can become a qualified storyteller one day.)

Being able to express that they would love to have other opportunities in the future indicated that the students' confidence level had been increased greatly. In the first rehearsal, the focus of students' reflections was on the language. They were mainly concerned about their pronunciation and the accuracy of sentence structure and grammar. In the second rehearsal, they worried about whether they made the stories appealing to the young children, what plots could be added to make the storytelling more interesting, and what activities they could use to attract young listeners. Their concern changed from language issues to mechanical skills. This indicated that they felt more comfortable with the language in the second rehearsal than in the first one. This may be because the instructor had corrected the grammar and

some English usages in the first rehearsal. The students, furthermore, consulted with one of the professors in the department to correct their pronunciation. All these improvements helped build up their confidence in speaking English.

In the third rehearsal, the students shifted their attention to the storytelling materials, such as what PowerPoint slides or materials could be used along with the storytelling. In the last rehearsal, the students' anxiety levels had all decreased. They did not mind inviting the professional storyteller to give them some further advice. They felt more comfortable in front of the video. All these nonverbal behaviors demonstrated the change from peripheral to fuller participation after the four rehearsals. The appropriateness and success of the students' verbal and nonverbal participation in the real storytelling event were reflected in the expressions of pleasure on the faces of the students.

There seems to be clear evidence that the instructor and students co-construct the students' fuller participation in the rehearsals. The instructor selected the students to produce fuller turns by offering some advice and asking questions. The students participated by completing the requests. Furthermore, in the later rehearsals and during the real storytelling event, the students knew what they could improve without waiting for a directive from the instructor to do so. The students' fuller participation in management of turns, including their nonverbal behavior, demonstrates the development of their interactional competence in this practice.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The participation framework changed over time. Although the sequence of acts that comprised the interactional architecture of the practice remained relatively constant over the 4 weeks of storytelling practices, the participation of both instructor and students changed, and changed in a way that showed mutual co-construction of their roles. In the initial rehearsal, the instructor directed the students to perform. When we looked at the rehearsal 4 weeks later, however, we saw that the students were performing many of the acts that were developed during the interaction processes. They identified the problems and the need for improvement. What is more important is that the degree of the students' language proficiency and confidence increased through the series of four rehearsals. This indicates that the students tried to show that they had mastered the interactional architecture of the practice by preforming all acts except those that uniquely constructed the role of instructor (Young & Miller, 2004). It is in this sense that we can say that the students have acquired interactional competence in the practice of storytelling.

From the situated learning perspective, learning is a process that takes place in a situated practice, not in an individual mind. In the case of situated practice of storytelling rehearsals, the instructor and the students jointly constructed the changes in participation that we observed as the students developed from peripheral to fuller participation. Not only was the students' participation transformed, but the instructor was also a co-learner, and her participation developed in a way that complemented the students' learning.

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