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## What's a Language Teacher to Do?

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## What's a Language Teacher to Do?

Brian Daniel BRESNIHAN

### 1. This Is the Way to Teach

John Fanselow begins his two most well known books with the same short anecdote of one of his early and most memorable observations in a language classroom. It occurred in Nigeria in 1961, at the beginning of his Peace Corps work, in which he was expected to assist in the improvement of the country's education of children. At this moment, he and a few others were in a classroom watching a practicing teacher teach a lesson. A supervisor was with them in order to show them how they could help practicing teachers become better at teaching. As they were observing the lesson, suddenly the supervisor jumped up and said, "You call yourself a teacher? I'll show you how to teach." He then marched to the front of the room and took over the lesson for a while, ending with, "Now, see if you can teach the way I want you to." After this, the practicing teacher continued teaching (Fanselow, 1987, p. 1; 1992, p. 1).

Fanselow continues saying that when he encounters advice about teaching being given by one person to another, in person or in a lecture, in a book or in a recording, regardless of how subtle or roundabout the explanation is, this scene almost always comes to mind. He senses that one person is claiming to know what good teaching is and isn't, that good teaching is being assumed to be something that is universally stable for all times and all situations. And to him, this is nonsense. Who, how, what, when, where, why are all important elements in the learning and teaching processes. A good way for one person may be useless for another; Something that seems to be effective one day, and may seem much less effective another day.

I tend to concur with this view. So, what follows is not meant to be a prescription of good English language teaching to copy. Rather, these are a few scenes of a teacher, myself, giving directions for and students carrying out activities that I have found useful for giving some of my students opportunities to use the English they can draw out of themselves in interactions with their classmates and for keeping them engaged in practicing using English. Although

the setting is unusual for my students, I have had students do the same activities in usual classroom settings, as well.

## 2. Scenes of a teacher

### 2.1 Day 1: Set Up

It's Friday afternoon at the end of the third week of the second/autumn semester at our university. The students have just finished their last scheduled classes for the day. Now, they are piling onto a rented bus for an overnight trip, required of these forty-eight students in the program they applied to join after having been admitted to the university and they are a part of. After the three quarters of an hour ride, from what I would call a somewhat suburban area in Japan to a somewhat more rural area, I lead the students off the bus in front of the facility we will be staying at. As this is during the first month of the second semester of their freshman year, and all of the students are in the same department and program, they all know each other.

Following a rather large dinner, the students head for the gymnasium in which class will be held for the next three hours. Beforehand, I have arranged foldable chairs in one corner into eight groups of five students each and two groups of four students each. On one chair in each group, there is a small piece of paper with the names of the students assigned to that group. I have also placed ten tables separated from each other by as much space as much as possible and at a distance from this corner, eight along three of the walls and two sort of in the middle but toward the far end. These will be used later. When I enter, the students have found a few volleyballs and frisbees and are enjoying themselves, but soon I need to end this.

Here in Japan, I consider the English level of these students to be intermediate to upper intermediate. (Their TOEIC IP scores at the end of the first semester were between 410 and 715, the average being about 565.) Except for the fact that I expect them to speak in English as much as possible with each other, they have not done any of the activities they will be doing with me on this trip before. After they all find their seats and quiet down, I explain the directions, in English. I know this is not the most efficient way to give directions, orally and in English, I mean. However, if I don't give my students these kinds of experiences to deal with, to struggle with, through my teaching, many of them will not ever have them in their university education. As most of these students have some intentions regarding using English in their futures, which they have stated and is the assumption behind their wishing to join this particular program, such experiences can be beneficial for them.

## 2.2 Day 1: First Directions

Once the sports equipment has been put away and the students have found their seats and sat down, I explain that the directions, which are on the top of the piece of paper each group will get one copy of, say one group member is to read the first section aloud, another the second section, another the third, etc., until all four sections have been read aloud; and then to do it again, but for students not to read the same sections as they had the first time. So, they are to take turns reading aloud and listening until all four sections are read twice. I say all this a few times, showing the page and pointing to students in one of the groups to indicate the changing of readers. Yes, this is challenging for most of the students to understand. (If you ask your students to write down even the simplest directions you have been saying to them for weeks, even if they obviously know what to do when you tell them, you will find out why they have so much trouble doing something new. It's because they don't really understand the exact words and structures of what you say.)

I also explain that not until they have read the four sections aloud twice are they to begin discussing the questions that follow, that they are to speak in English, that they are not to write down their answers, that the purpose of discussing the questions is to talk a lot in English and not to find answers as quickly as possible, and that they are to discuss only the first 12 questions and not to go on to the second set of questions. (Yes, that is a lot for them to listen to and understand. However, most of it is included on the handout (Appendix A) they will soon be given.) I also tell them when they need to be finished by.

I then give one copy of the handout to one person in each group. Basically, the content of the reading is about a high school student who has become disinterested in school but very interested in his part-time job. There is a short paragraph followed by three short dialogues, of the student with his mother, one of his teachers, and his boss. Of the first twelve questions that follow, only half of the first one concerns explaining what has been read. The other half of number one and numbers two through five require students to consider what the characters in the reading are thinking. The rest of the questions ask students to give their personal opinions about questions related to working part-time, education, and adults' wishes for students and workers.

## 2.3 Day 1: First Actions

For the next fifty-five minutes, they are engaged in this activity. Some groups seem to know what to do fairly quickly. Students in other groups are raising their hands to ask me what

they need to do. In just a few minutes, all the groups are doing the first task, but a few soon need yet another explanation about taking turns to read aloud. I encourage the readers to sit back in their chairs while they read aloud so the rest of the group members listen rather than read silently.

After that, while they are discussing the questions, some groups are huddled together. Others remain sitting back in their chairs. All of the students seem to be paying attention and participating, most quite actively.

What I do during all of this is slowly wander among the groups monitoring their progress and the students' participation, and answering questions that students have from time to time. Only a very few students need somewhat frequent reminders to speak in English. (Did you assume correctly that they are boys?) When it is time to finish this activity, most of the groups have discussed all of the questions, the first having finished five minutes earlier. (I tell them they can discuss whatever they want when finished, as long as they do so in English.) Shortly before the fifty-five minutes is up, I put one of the slips of paper with the lists of students' names, which I had collected from them earlier, on each of the tables. Then, it is time for a break.

Before they get up from their chairs, I tell them that when they come back, they need to find which table they are at. A few students head off to the bathrooms, but most stay in the gym as the volleyballs and frisbees are again taken out. My job now is to rearrange the chairs to form a kind of fenced-in area in the same corner of the gym enclosing about 15% of it, leaving two entryways in each of the two sides that are not the gym walls. As the students are enjoying themselves so much, I allow the break to extend from ten minutes to fifteen before I end it.

#### 2.4 Day 1: Second Directions

As the students make their way to their tables, I call one student from each group to the center of the gymnasium. I stand with these ten students in a tight circle and explain the directions for the next activity. This is met with many puzzled looks and questions and takes about ten minutes. The directions concern the last exercise at the bottom of the same handout and are also written on it. Each group's handout has five yes/no questions to ask other group's members. No group has any of the same questions. (So actually, there are ten different versions of Appendix A.) Each group also needs to create two more yes/no questions related

to the same topic as the handout to ask. So, each group will have seven questions.

Each group member is to ask each of those seven questions to two students from other groups. However, not all seven questions need to be asked by a student to one particular classmate. The student can ask seven different students one question each, for example. Also, the handout is to stay on the table, but all of the questioning and answering is to be done inside the space I enclosed with the chairs. I call this area the Talking Zone (Bresnihan, 1994; Bresnihan & Stoops, 1996). I tell them they need not remember all the questions at once and are free to go back and forth as often as they like. One last requirement is that they need to make a chart of the answers. (You now see why it took ten minutes to explain what to do.)

When the ten students indicate that they think they understand what they will do, they all go back to their tables and explain it to their group members. After a few minutes, I walk from table to table to answer questions and be sure the groups write two more questions and make the chart to tally the responses they collect.

### 2.5 Day 1: Second Actions

In about ten minutes, the first students are heading for the Talking Zone. For the next twenty-five minutes, the gymnasium is filled with talking and laughter, walking and running. Students are waving and calling to each other, walking arm in arm, hand in hand, going back and forth, back and forth from their tables and papers to the Talking Zone to grab friends to talk with. Dozens of short conversations are going on all at once. My main task is moving pairs that form outside the entrance of the Talking Zone into it.

The students always seem much more engaged in this kind of activity when using this procedure than when doing it or similar activities (Information Gap or Find Someone Who, for example) while sitting in chairs and looking at the text or questions. It is also more likely that the students will remember and be able to use the questions, structures, and vocabulary later than if they do not need to memorize anything.

### 2.6 Day 1: Third Directions

When all of the groups have finished, I call a different student from each group to the center of the room to gather and be told the instructions for the last activity of the evening. I explain that each student is to present the results of one or two questions from the survey they just conducted, either as a count or a percentage, to all of us. Each is to say the question or two

questions and the results, and not to be looking at any papers while doing so. In a few minutes, all of the students understand this and head back to their groups to explain it and prepare. This takes about ten minutes. Meanwhile, I rearrange the forty-eight chairs into rows in the same corner of the room facing the corner. When they are all ready, I tell them it is time come to the corner and sit down.

## 2.6 Day 1: Third Actions

I call one group at a time to the front. Some groups add a few sentences to introduce or conclude what they are doing. Most of the students use percentages, but some use counts. All in the audience are attentive. A few students say a little more than is required. Some speak quite naturally while others speak in a rather stilted way. Most are in between in their manner of speaking. It is all short and simple, but probably the first time for most of them to have done such a thing in English. Most of the last speakers of each group add a thank you for listening. Applause follows each group's conclusion. It takes twenty-five minutes to complete these. I close the evening thanking them for their well-done presentations and reminding them when breakfast will begin, and asking them for their help in putting away the chairs and tables. They are all put away in less than ten minutes.

## 3. Day 2

### 3.1 First Directions

The next morning, some students are looking very sleepy, having stayed up half the night. However, all make it to breakfast and are in the large classroom, not the gymnasium, by the designated time. I have placed the chairs in ten groups in a way similar to how they were the night before only adjusted for the rectangular shaped room, and they nearly fill it. Again, there is a slip of paper with students names, differently arranged, on one chair in each group.

I begin by giving the directions orally to whole group of students, explaining that they are to read a short passage and a list of statements aloud in turns and to read everything twice. Then, they are to discuss the nine questions and this time to write down their answers. I again emphasize that the main goal is to talk a lot in English and not to just answer the questions as quickly as possible. I tell them they have seventy minutes to finish the activity. Then I give one handout (Appendix B), which also includes the directions, to each group. All begin right away. This only takes a few minutes in total.

The left side of the handout contains a very short paragraph, which states that a company wants to build a factory in a small town. It is followed by twenty-two comments about this proposal by members of the community. The right side has nine questions. The first asks the students to decide if each proposal is for or against the plan. The next three questions require the students to evaluate the proposal and statements based on their own opinions. For the fifth question, the students need to write three questions they would want to ask the company about the plan. The next three questions require the students to evaluate other similar proposals. The last question asks the students to think of ways they might be able to make their opinions known to others in their community, to the general public.

### 3.2 Day 2: First Actions

Just like last night, all of the students are engaged in the activity, though the same few boys need reminders to speak in English. Only one group completes the activity fairly early. When the activity is finished, I collect the handout, and it is time for a ten-minute break. I tell the students they must all leave the room so I can rearrange the chairs, which I do; into sixteen groups of three each, with three students' names on a slip of paper on one chair in each group.

### 3.3 Day 2: Second Directions

When the students have found their seats, I tell them orally that they are to write a short conversation among themselves about the previous topic they had been discussing, each taking on the role of one person from the list of twenty-two town residents on the left hand side of the handout (page 1 of Appendix B), which I give one copy of to each group. I tell them that each person must say at least 25 words and that when they are done, they need to bring it to me to check. These directions also cause a lot of confusion, and many students have their hands raised to ask me to explain them again. I walk around the room from group to group to give further explanations and answer questions. Eventually, all of the groups are on task. This all takes about ten minutes.

### 3.4 Day 2: Second Actions and Third Directions

One by one, the groups finish and bring their conversations to the table I have set up at one end of the room. After I have corrected the errors in the first few groups' conversations, everyone has heard the further instructions that I give after correcting; that each group will present its conversation to us all, without notes. It takes thirty-five minutes for all of the groups to write their conversations and have them checked, and I give them ten minutes after



the last group is finished to practice and remember what they have written.

Next, I tell the students to move their chairs to form one large oval, which encloses most of the room. Then, I tell them from the center of the oval that this is where they will present from, which gets a lot of exclamations of surprise. I choose one group to begin and indicate that the rest of the presentations will be made by the groups in clockwise order. After they get up, I sit in one of the three students' chairs to watch along with the rest of the students.

### 3.5 Day 2: Third Actions

Being unable to face the entire audience, the students naturally face each other and look at each other, as one would hope in a conversation but which often does not happen when a conversation is presented to the whole class or memorized. The first group does a very good job. All three students speak loud enough and with a bit of feeling in their voices. They get a big applause when they are done. And so it goes around the circle. Some groups and students speak and present very well, others less so. Two students draw a blank and need to run back to their seats for a quick reminder. All do a fine job. When they have finished, I praise them for the good work they have done, collect their papers, and ask them to help me rearrange the tables and chairs. In ten minutes, we are all heading for the cafeteria for lunch.

## 4. Rationale

As you have seen, I did not monitor the students very closely, instead trusting the students for the most part to carry out the activities to the best of their abilities. Not that I didn't notice anything or say anything if I thought a student was slacking off, but I expected that these students would make sufficient effort, and they did. I also did not do any correcting of oral mistakes during these activities. Another option would be to do so. A third would be to have students record their conversations for later listening, transcribing, and/or correcting. These are all worthwhile doing, but I decided not to do any of them because of the circumstances (the amount of time, number of students, timing, and rooms used).

I imagine you also took note of the fact that I did not say very much outside of setting the tasks, which were not very easy to follow for the most part. I did not provide much comprehensible input, outside of what was contained in the handouts. This also could have been done differently. However, one of my objectives was to have the students draw the language and assertiveness they needed out of themselves as much as possible. I wanted to have the students engage more in self-initiated, comprehensible output. In the very great majority of the classes these students have taken, they have been expected and forced to be

verbally silent. The same can be said of what occurs in most of the university classes they are currently taking. This has been a great hindrance in their learning of English and learning to be assertive in their oral communications. Another cultural hindrance to developing foreign language abilities for Japanese, especially in their usage, is the fear of making mistakes, which leads to a fear of taking risks.

If the teacher does not say much or correct much, though, over time, students do begin to open up and to become more active in their behavior, speaking, and thinking, even here in Japan, if the tasks set for them are appropriate, i.e., interesting and doable for them. However, this is the opposite of what most people, students and others, think makes a good teacher. Though not meant to be a language teacher, Donald Finkel describes the image of "The Great Teacher" as follows:

. . . She had an awe-inspiring command over the material, and in response to any question, could hold forth brilliantly for as long as she wished. She was captivating when she spoke. She made her field come alive. She got excited in explaining it, and her excitement was contagious. She was clear in her expositions. She asked probing questions and followed them with illuminating answers. When her lectures were over, her students left the classroom touched by what she had said. (Finkel, 2000, p. 5)

This is the idea in most people's minds of what makes a good teacher. He then goes on to explain that, in fact, the great majority of most people's most significant learning experiences do not take place in a classroom or with a person acting as a teacher. Instead of good teaching being equivalent to good lecturing, he claims that "[g]ood teaching is the creating of those circumstances that lead to significant learning." (Finkel, 2000, p. 8)

Furthermore, Coenraad van Houten discusses the requirements for educating people in our day and age, particularly once they are older than high school students. He explains that we come up against three hindrances in learning: "an insuperable barrier," "an abyss that causes fear," and "a strong feeling of antipathy or of powerlessness. These experiences are often accompanied by a feeling of inferiority, of weakness, etc. This is precisely why courage is needed . . ." (Houten, 1995, p. 17) "Learning always means to overcome resistances, to make an effort. . . . [W]hat is most important is to awaken people's independent will . . ." (Houten, 1995, pp. 13-14)

These ideas are more of what I was attempting by having my students carry out the activities I described, rather than increasing any particular details of their English language knowledge. I wanted them to have positive experiences engaging in activities that they at least partially initiated on their own and that would help them to continue overcoming their hesitations to speak in English. I think these goals were met. Although I provided most of the materials and set the initial tasks, I gave the students space to act out of their own will using whatever English they had inside themselves plus whatever new language they had just encountered and chose to try to use. “Language . . . is acquired by practice: nobody can do practice for someone else, and the active, explaining and questioning teacher . . . may be an obstacle to [its] acquisition . . .” (West, 1960, p. viii)

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Appendix A: To work or to study, that is the dilemma \*

First, one person will read aloud the paragraph about Cedric to the others in your group, who will listen. Then, another person will read “Cedric at home,” another “Cedric at school,” and another “Cedric at work.” Then, repeat these steps with different people reading different parts until everything has been read twice.

Cedric is a 16-year-old junior in high school. He has become very interested in cars. He wants to buy a used one and fix it up. His parents do not have enough money to buy one for him, so he decides to try to get a part-time job to work at after school. He finds an ad for a stock boy at the local car-parts store downtown. He goes there for an interview and get the job. It's the first job he has ever had. He works three hours a day after school and eight hours on Saturdays. He loves it. He is working with cars, well, at least with car parts, and he has his own money. But, he has not stopped keeping up with his schoolwork.

Cedric at home

Mother: Cedric, are you doing okay in school, I mean with your schoolwork?

Cedric: Ma, I have a job now. I'm not interested in school. It's so boring.

Mother: You know, I want you to finish school. You can't work as a stock boy for the rest of your life. That's good for now, but it won't be later on.

Cedric: But Mr. Harvey says I have a good future in the auto-parts business.

Cedric at school

Teacher: Cedric, did you study last night for today's test?

Cedric: No, not much Mrs. Ivey.

Teacher: How do you expect to pass if you don't study?

Cedric: I don't know. I just didn't have enough time last night.

Cedric at work

Boss: Cedric, when you finish moving those boxes, start unpacking the new shipment that just arrived.

Cedric: Yes, sir. No problem. I'll get started on it soon.

Boss: You know, Cedric, if you stay with me, you'll learn everything there is to know in this business.

Cedric: That's just what I want, Mr. Harvey, but my mother wants me to finish school.

Next, discuss the twelve questions below. The goal is to talk a lot in English, not to find the easiest and quickest answers to the questions. Do not write down your answers.

1. How does Cedric behave and how does he feel at home, at school, and at work? Why do you think he behaves and feels as he does at these three places?
2. What do you think Cedric's mother wants and hopes for Cedric now and for his future?
3. What do you think Mrs. Ivey wants and hopes for Cedric now and for his future?
4. What do you think Mr. Harvey wants and hopes for Cedric now and for his future?
5. What do you think Cedric wants and hopes for himself now and for his future?
6. At what age do you think it should be okay for a young person to work? Why?
7. If you have worked and/or are working now, tell your classmates about it? What did/do you do? What did/have you learned and gained from it? What was/has been difficult and/or troubling?
8. What do you think your parents want and hope for you?
9. What do you think your various teachers want or wanted and hope or hoped for you?
10. What do you think bosses/supervisors of part-time workers want and hope for their workers?
11. What do you want and hope for yourself in the future?
12. Why is education important in life?

Now, below are some Yes/No questions to ask classmates who are not in your group. Each person will ask two people the seven questions (two that your group writes) and write down whether the person agrees or disagrees. (After this is finished, the people in each group will collate their answers and produce a chart of what number or percentage of the people asked agreed and disagreed with each question. The results of this survey will be presented orally to all of us, each group member presenting responses to one or two questions.)

When you are asking the questions, you will not be looking at the paper. The paper will be left on the table/desk and you will ask and answer questions elsewhere. Therefore, you need to remember the questions and your classmates' answers. But, you may go back and forth between the table/desk and the talking area as often as you wish. Yes, there will be a lot of walking back and forth.

1. Is it a good idea to let students work while they are in junior high school?
2. Is spending a lot of time with family more important than making a lot of money?
3. Are university students under too much pressure to get good grades?
4. Should everyone go to college or university?
5. Does getting an education mean learning how to think?
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_

\* Adapted from Donald R. H. Byrd's *React Interact: Situations for Communication*, Second Edition 1991, Prentice -Hall, Inc., Chapter 14.

### Appendix B: Progress \*

One person read aloud the short paragraph below to the others in your group, who will listen. Then, another person read a, another b, another c, etc., until all of the comments have been read. Continue doing this until the paragraph and all of the comments have been read twice.

A manufacturing company wants to build a large factory in the small and peaceful but economically stagnant town of Centerville. These are some comments from various townspeople concerning this plan.

- a. A local clergyman said, “We have such a peaceful town now.”
- b. A housewife said, “A new industry nearby always raises the standard of living.”
- c. The sanitation head said, “Let’s keep our town clean.”
- d. The parks director said, “The new factory will help us build a new recreation center.”
- e. The mayor said, “This town needs the economic boost.”
- f. A farmer said, “Crime rates are higher in industrialized areas.”
- g. A nurse said, “We’ll have better bus service when the new factory opens.”
- h. A merchant said, “A new factory always results in increases in sales in the town.”
- i. A town council member said, “The people in this town are good workers.”
- j. The housing inspector said, “New industries create a need for more housing.”
- k. A forest ranger said, “Industries cause environmental pollution and destroy the land.”
- l. A social worker said, “Unemployment is particularly high right now.”
- m. A dentist said, “People will live better here if a new factory comes to town.”
- n. A manufacturer said, “Small towns provide a good work force.”
- o. The town judge said, “This industry might increase crime because of the many strangers who will move into this town.”
- p. A senior citizen said, “Public transportation improves when new industries move in.”
- q. A factory superintendent said, “Industries should go to areas where there are a lot of people out of work.”
- r. A contractor said, “This factory will create a demand for construction of many new apartments and shops.”
- s. A businessman said, “Industrialization improves the economy.”

- t. A pharmacist said, "The small stores in town will have more customers."
- u. A gym teacher said, "Better recreational facilities usually result from hometown industries."
- v. A physician said, "More noise and traffic usually result from large factories."

Now, discuss the nine questions below. The goal is to talk a lot in English, not to find the easiest and quickest answers to the questions. One person read the first question aloud twice, and then everyone discuss it. Then another person read the second question aloud twice. Etc. Write down all of your answers.

1. Put a plus sign (+) in front of each statement that supports the new factory being built. Put a minus sign (-) in front of each statement that is against the new factory being built.
2. Having read these townspeople's ideas, would you be in favor of or against this plan? Why?
3. Which three townspeople do you think have opinions most similar to yours (to each person in your group) about this issue?
4. Decide within your group, as if you were the town council, whether you agree to allow this new factory to be built or not. Each member has one vote. Why did you decide as you did?
5. If you were on the town council, what are three questions you would want to ask the manufacturing company about their plans for the new factory before deciding whether to support it or not?

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Which of the following would you support or object to if an industry wanted to build it in your town?

- |                              |                                      |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| a. an oil refinery           | i. a chemical factory                |
| b. a medicine factory        | j. an automobile manufacturing plant |
| c. a nuclear power plant     | k. a paper mill                      |
| d. a weapons factory         | l. a plant/tree nursery              |
| e. a junk yard for used cars | m. a chocolate factory               |
| f. a food packaging plant    | n. a coffee roasting plant           |



g. a small parts factory  
h. a steel mill

o. a toy manufacturing plant  
p. a dairy farm

7. From the list above, which five would you object to the most and/or support the least? Rank these five from most objectionable to least objectionable, and give reasons why.
8. From the list above, which five would you support the most and/or object to the least? Rank these five from most favorable to least favorable.
9. What are some things you could do in order to make your opinions about plans for a new industry to be built in your town known to others? Which of them might you do as an individual? Which might you do as part of a group?

\* Adapted from Donald R. H. Byrd's *React Interact: Situations for Communication*, Second Edition 1991, Prentice -Hall, Inc., Chapter 26.

# What's a Language Teacher to Do?

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## Abstract

In a fresh departure from learner narrative, this paper takes the teacher's perspective and hears the teacher narrate his thoughts, plans and adaptations throughout a series of classroom activities.

Keywords: communicative language teaching, narrative,