NARRATIVES IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

© **Martin Klimovič**
University of Prešov, Slovakia

martin.klimovic@pf.unipo.sk

A narrative shift in humanities focused attention on the story as a cognitive construct. Stories are a basic human strategy for coping with time, changes and processes as a part of experience of the world. Stories are part of cognitive and communication activities of the individual from every day conversation to artistic expression in terms, movement and image. In linguistics, narratives are seen as verbalized memories of past or ongoing experiences (Heath), two independent clauses produced in the mutual respect of one event (Labov), a fundamental way of organizing human experience and a tool for constructing models of reality (Herman). In contribution, narratives are seen as a possible way of development of communication competence in both pre-school children and primary-school children. Some explanations in narration studies show different narrative types. Description of narrative types extends the range of communication activities in school, especially in text production. Children´s narratives contain not just fictionalized stories (storytelling), but recounts, event casts (planning of future events) and accounts of author´s experience, too. Otherwise, through presentation of narrative levels a reader can follow the developmental aspects of narrative competence (the ability to comprehend the narrative structure of a text, but also the ability to create his/her own narrative text). It seems that narrative skills correlate with cognitive characteristics (in cognitive sciences: seeing X as Y), which brings a number of implications to the development of communication skills in individualized form. In the end of the paper our own research in narration field using story grammar approaches is presented. After analyzing many Slovak children´s stories, it seems that a universal model of child´s step by step improving narrative skills according to the development of story grammar can be defined. (This paper is a partial output of the Slovak grant scheme KEGA, research No. 3/7270/09 Integrovaná didaktika slovenského jazyka a literatúry pre primárne vzdelávanie.)

Keywords: Narratives, Development of Narratives, Narrative Types, Story Grammar, Narratives in School

Narratives were analysed for the first time (without coining the term) by a Russian folklorist V. Propp in the book *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928. He analysed Russian folk tales and has found that, in spite of the surface variability, they have a common deep structure. He therefore attempted to determine the basic functions of the events present in folk tales (Hoffmannová, 1997:88).

In 1960, after V. Propps book was translated into English and French, the attention of structuralists (especially French R. Barthes, C Brémond, A Gremais and others) focused on the analysis of other literary works applying the similar methodology. Literary science in the given period strived to find out and describe how the characters are presented in the sequence of events, which role they carry out, what role performs a setting is in the plot, narrators standpoint, objects present in the plot, etc. A French term "la narratologie" emerged in the given period referring to a *science which deals with the theory and analysis of a narrative structure*. The process of storytelling was termed – "*narration*". The result of this process is a *narrative*, a text of the story or narrative message (Hoffmannová, 1997:88).

Narratological approaches have gradually, in the course of years, shifted attention from literary narratives to other areas. The first impulse for such a shift came from the works of Labov and Waletzki (1967) who applying sociolinguist approach analysed non-literary text, a spontaneous talking of *life stories*. Life stories are substance for people to gain various experiences in some specific strands of human activity.

Life story is a narrative organised selection of the events relevant to the situation in which a narrator is (Linde, 2008:277). Certain types of life stories repeat in a verbal interaction of people: stories about important milestones of life as wedding, birth of a child, change of employment of promotion in the career, serious health problems, changes of religious or ideological worldview, etc.

A shift towards narratives in humanities has brought many new scientific approaches to study what an individual is capable to reveal about his/her own cognition, emotions, social relations and mental representations by manifold narrative schemes. Narratives have become a part of wide trans-disciplinary research.

Delimitation of the Term Narrative

In narrative structure, we produce a sequence of utterances relevant to a particular event. Heath (1986:84) states that *narratives* can be understood as "*verbal recollections of previous or ongoing experiences.*" Narratives are characteristic of a high degree of structuring context as they are bound with specific area of human experience. Herman (2002; after Ryan, 2008:345), when describing the term, stated that narrative is *a fundamental way of organising human experience and a tool for constructing models of reality*.

The first definition of narratives was offered in 1972 by Labov (after McLaughlin, 2006:283). Narratives are, according to him, "*two independent clauses produced in succession relating to a single event.*"

Narratives have been in the centre of attention in the last four decades. The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory (Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2008:202) concludes in three points *why the narratives are the object of study*:
1. Narratives provide an important function for people, chronologically ordering events for better understanding;
2. Narrative discourse is mastered at the same time and the same way as the mother tongue, which indicates that the user of a language demonstrates the same natural ability as in using word stock, syntax and semantics;
3. Narratives are a powerful tool for delivering traditional cultural values through legends and myths, they are privileged by a culture to support a dominant ideology.

Psychological Approaches to Narratives

Psychological researches into narratives go in two ways following the internal structure of the discipline. They are focused on (after Gerrig, 2008:470-474):

1. *cognitive aspect of a narrative* – cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics analyse basic processes grounded in human ability to receive and produce story and to form a coherent representation of the story. In other words, which processes transfer man from the world "here and now" to the world of fiction or a timespace of the story (such an approach is aptly characterised as *how words become worlds*);

2. *developmental aspect of a narrative* – developmental psychology and psycholinguistics explore how a child arrives at the mature narrative competence (in both ways – understanding as well as producing narratives), thus in what sequence man acquires memory related abilities and linguistic abilities, so as the transfer from the real into a fictional world could take place.

Psychological approaches reroute the perception of narratives from originally narrow linguistic or literary angle to a more complex, trans-disciplinary view. Some findings of *cognitive sciences* from the domain of reception of narratives can be regarded as contributing. It is for example scientifically proven that people in reconstructing narratives lean on their cultural expectations. *Memory* plays a significant role in understanding and producing narratives. Processes of memory are mental operations which enable to transform perceived information into acquired experience of the narrative world. Such processes are initiated by mental representations stored in long term memory. Long term memory contains two different systems of knowledge (functional systems):

1. *semantic memory*, which contains general knowledge as a result of generalisation or abstraction (for example the knowledge that water is a liquid, that animals need water for life or that the chemical formula for water is H_2O);

2. *episodic memory*, which contains information on personal experience, on episodes (events) set in the concrete time-space conditions (Dolník, 1999:125).

Semantic memory contains knowledge which is independent on personal identity and individual's past. On the other hand, personal experience of an individual is stored in episodic memory by means of temporal and causal relations (Vitz, 1990:711). The capacity and functioning of episodic memory together with the general knowledge of an individual become regulating "mental dynamo" in the process of comprehension and production of narratives.

The research of the developmental aspect of narratives has brought some interesting findings. It was already mentioned that the development of narrative competence depends on the development of memory and language abilities. Operational memory – memory system which allows an individual to store information temporarily and to manipulate with it – has an important position in the process of comprehending narratives. It is thus natural that people with larger capacity of operational memory can interpret the text in a more complex way. Other researches confirm that the quality and quantity of

narrative based activities carried out by parents with their children have a significant influence on the development of narrative competence (Gerrig, 2008:299-300).

Development of Narrative Competence

The occurrence of narrative utterances grows from the moment in which a child is capable of referring about things and persons not present in the communication situation. Between the second and the third year of child's age first narratives, denoted as *protonarratives* (or *prenarratives*)**,** can be spotted (McLaughlin, 2006:285; Owens, 2008:245). Protonarratives are the first form of narratives. They are brief and simple events from the near past which left an intense impression in a child. Protonarratives are further differentiated into the levels (see Westby, 1984; after McLaughlin, 2006:285; Zajacová, 2005:76-78; Harčaríková & Eddy, 2008:247-251).

Primitive narratives are another level of narratives which children start to produce around four years of age (Westby, 1984; after McLaughlin, 2006:286). Such narratives lack a plot which would organise acting of persons in speech towards the achievement of the goal.

The last shift in the narrative development of preschoolers occurs after the fifth year of age. Since this moment, the narrative utterances produced by children are called *true narratives* (Westby, 1984; after McLaughlin, 2006:375). The child in this level creates both reproductive and productive stories. He or she understands cause-effect relationship in the story and can infer possible consequences from the acts of persons. Plot becomes the central organising theme of speaking in the age of eight (McLaughlin, 2006:376).

Within the true narratives it is possible to separate several independent levels. In the process of development of children's narrative abilities between ending preschool age to adolescence *four degrees of true narratives* can be recognised (McLaughlin, 2006:376):

a) *unfocused chains* – are characteristic of the weak consistency to the topic although elements are linked together relatively logically;

b) by 9 years of age another level of narratives emerges, *focused chains* – the author of the story organises and puts the events into sequences around a character of the story but omits reasoning for the character's actions;

c) the third level of true narratives comprises *complete narratives* which are characteristic for the high degree of reciprocal relationships among events, character and actions which are reasoned; such narratives show elements of mature narratives (the example of the complete narrative is presented in the introduction of this subchapter, the author is 13 years old Zuzana);

d) the last level which adolescents achieve is *complex narratives* which are typical for multiple embedded episodes and characters without endangering the logic of a narrative while the basic theme is often divided into subplots (so called multiplot narratives belong to this group, i.e. such narratives in which seemingly unrelated events of many characters meet in one narrative unit; O´Neill, 2008:367-368).

Narrative Types

Researches into the speech of children who come from various socio-cultural conditions have shown that each society gives children an opportunity to receive and to produce *universal type of narratives* (Heath, 1986:88). Regardless of the continent or social class, verbal interaction of children and adults brings personal experience with four basic types of narratives:

1. *recounts*
2. *eventcast*
3. *accounts*
4. *stories* (Heath, 1986:88-90).

The above narrative types can be divided into the two groups according to the criterion of real or made up event (Heath, 1986:88). The literature denotes the former class more precisely as *personal narratives – recounts, eventcasts and accounts* as the opposites of the fictitious narratives – stories (compare McCabe, 1997:137; Ilgaz & Aksu-Koç, 2005:527).

We are not going to make detailed introduction of recounts, event casts and accounts. More area will be reserved for the latter of the above narrative types. *Stories* are considered the most easily recognisable form of narratives with highly organised structure (Heath, 1986:89-90). They include the reproduction of fairytales or fictive stories which often begin with phrases as *once upon a time*; *there was*; *behind seven hills and seven valleys* etc. (compare McLaughlin, 2006:284).

Each story is based on setting, characters and events. Listener (or reader) creates his or her own image of the events content by recognizing key elements of the story present in it, i.e. he or she interprets the story (Owens, 2008:319). The plot of a story is made up of identifiable units. Central unit of the story is an episode (sequence of events in which someone acts in order to achieve a goal). Episode of a story includes 7 categories which make rules for both understanding and producing stories:

1. setting – introduction of characters or environment,
2. initial event – main character's primary motivation to act,
3. internal response – feelings and thoughts of the main character evoked by the initial event
4. goal – outlines the intention of the main character
5. attempt – activity by which the main character wants to achieve the goal
6. consequence – indicates whether the character achieved the goal
7. reaction – evaluative reactions and responses of the protagonist on previous events (see Owens, 2008).

Detailed analysis of the stories have gradually formed a branch preoccupied with the inner grammar (morphology) of a story, so called *story grammar*. Story schemes enable us to recognize age related characteristics of the children's narratives. The higher the coherence of elements of the story the easier a child can create a coherent mental representation of the story (Trabasso, Secco & van den Broek, 1982:3). The ability to apply the components of the so called story grammar was analysed in the pedagogical experiment which will be presented in the following part of the paper.

Narratives in School

The narrative texts were obtained by the method of direct elicitation (see Ely et al., 2000:251). The children were asked to write a story from the picture (a cat with a parachute in the introductory test, a snake with an umbrella in the final test). We have devised experimental and control groups. The experimental group underwent training in the techniques of creative writing during one academic year. We have been observing the relationship between the intervention of the creative writing and verbal production of the children in junior school age (Year 3 and 4). We have analysed more than 500 children stories with the criteria of presence/absence of the story grammar components and developmental characteristics of the narrative competence. According to McLaughlin (2006), a 9 year old child is expected to produce chains of utterances centred at the protagonist of the story. According to the above defined level of the narrative development, the products of the pupils in Year 3 and 4 can be divided into three groups: the text which had not reached this level (McLaughlin speaks of unorganised narratives which do not respect basic plot line; p. 376), than the texts which attained the desired level and, finally, the texts which exceeded the desired level (McLaughlin labelled them complete narratives which evidence the characteristics similar to a mature adult structure of narratives; p. 376).

In the following survey we offer several findings about narrative competence of the children in the junior school age which emerged in the course of the experiment and evaluation. Given findings can serve as the points of departure in drafting a teaching programme aimed at developing verbal production of children in primary school.

1. Assessing the qualitative changes the narrative structure of the stories have shown that creative writing component in the applied creative programme does not have a tendency to significantly shift ahead the ability to create a narrative text. Narrative structure of the text develops in parallel with the development of the intellectual abilities of the child according to almost steady plan. A progression from additive chains which prevail in narratives at the beginning of junior school age to complete narratives at the end of the given age follows the ontogenetic axis. Leaps between the stages of the so called true narratives are most probably not possible.

2. In assessing the structure of the story produced by the same child with reference to the so called story grammar, we have not recorded a single incidence of the reduction of the story components, which seems to prove the dominant factor of cognitive abilities development in parallel with the development of the ability to employ story elements. Such findings correspond with the researches of the leading narratologists (compare Peterson & McCabe, 1983; after Cook-Gumperz & Kyratzis, 2008): according to which younger children would tell usual and ordinary parts of a story but would omit key moments, introductory event or conclusion. According to narratologists, evaluative parts of a text and author's comments and standpoints appear in children's narratives later. Owens (2008) also stresses a gradual application of the story grammar's elements indicating the age of 9-10 as a period of mastering the so called complex narratives (p. 324).

3. As a result of applying creative writing techniques program, the standard of coherence and cohesion in the texts of children from the experimental group has risen. This might signal a higher integrity of

the mental representation of the story in pupils mind and at the same time more flexible repertoire the text cohesion language tools.

4. The children's stories have evidenced typical feature of children's spontaneous text-creating: children of this age prefer similar ways of connecting utterances (for example frequent lexical repetition). Especially in lower age, the written story texts are syntactically schematic and stereotypical and contain the elements of colloquial spontaneity which is evidenced by frequent unfunctional pronominalisation, violated word order or sentence order etc.

5. Written production of a child is often limited by perseveration (this means a tendency in mental activity to move within a time span in one direction until exhaustion or interruption by some external cause – Guilford, 1967) of thinking. Perseveration can by distinctly observed in creating the concept of a story by a junior age child – a child elects at the beginning certain moment or idea as a starting point by which a theme is further developed sometimes though at the expense of logic and the original idea. A child in junior school age usually sticks to already produced previous part of the text even though he or she realises that the story could (and should) develop in completely different direction.

6. Written stories of children are the reflection of children's cognitive dispositions. In no way should those texts be regarded by teachers as stylistically incorrect or imperfect, right the contrary holds. Children's story reflects the way of thinking and the cognitive level of a writer. The story written by the child writer points out, thank to story grammar, on the developmental stage of the narrative competence of a child.

References

COOK-GUMPERZ, J., & KYRATZIS, A. (2008). Children´s Storytelling. In Herman, D., Jahn, M., & Ryan, M. L. (Eds.), *Routledge Encyklopedia of Narrative Theory* (pp. 60-62). London, New York: Routledge.

DOLNÍK, J. (1999). *Základy lingvistiky*. Bratislava: Stimul – Centrum informatiky a vzdelávania FF UK.

ELY, R., MCCABE, A., WOLF, A., & MELZI, G.. (2000). The Story Behind the Story: Gathering Narrative Data From Children. In Menn, L., & Ratner, N. B. (Eds.), *Methods for Studying Language Production* (pp. 249-269). New Jersey, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

GERRIG, R. J. (2008). Psychological Approaches to Narrative. Memory. In Herman, D., Jahn, M., & Ryan, M. L. (Eds.), *Routledge Encyklopedia of Narrative Theory* (pp. 299-300, 470-474). London, New York: Routledge.

GUILFORD, J. P. (1967). *The Nature of Human Intelligence*. New York: McGraw Hill.

HARČARÍKOVÁ, P., & EDDY, E. Definition of Narrative in the Slovak Linguistic Literature. In Fabian, M. P. (Ed.), *Sučasni doslidženia z inozemnoi filologii* (pp. 247-251). Užhorod: Zbirnik naukovych prac. Užgorodskyj nacionaľnyj universitet.

HEATH, S. (1986). Taking a cross-cultural look at narratives. *Topics in Language Disorders*, *7* (1), 84-94.

HERMAN, D. (2002). *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

HERMAN, D., JAHN, M., & RYAN, M. L. (Eds.) (2008). *Routledge Encyklopedia of Narrative Theory*. London, New York: Routledge.

HOFFMANNOVÁ, J. (1997). *Stylistika*. Praha: Trizonia.

ILGAZ, H., & AKSU-KOÇ, A. (2005). Episodic development in preschool children's play-prompted and direct elicited narratives. *Cognitive Development*, *20* (4), 526-544.

LABOV, W., & WALETZKY, J. (1967). Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, *7*, 3-38.

LINDE, Ch. (2008). Life Story. In Herman, D., Jahn, M., & Ryan, M. L. (Eds.), *Routledge Encyklopedia of Narrative Theory* (pp. 277-278). London, New York: Routledge.

MCCABE, A. (1997). Developmental and Cross-Cultural Aspects of Children´s Narration. In Bamberg, M. (Ed.), *Narrative Development: Six Approaches* (pp. 137-174). New Jersey, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

MCLAUGHLIN, S. (2006). *Introduction to Language Development* (2nd Rev. ed.). Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Gengage Learning.

O´NEILL, P. (2008). Narrative Structure. In Herman, D., Jahn, M., & Ryan, M. L. (Eds.), *Routledge Encyklopedia of Narrative Theory* (pp. 366-370). London, New York: Routledge.

OWENS, R. E. (2008). *Language Development. An Introduction*. New York: Pearson Education.

PETERSON, C., & MCCABE, A. (1983). *Developmental Psycholinguistics: Three Ways of Looking at a Child´s Narrative*. New York: Plenum Press.

RYAN, M-L. (2008). Narration. In Herman, D., Jahn, M., & Ryan, M. L. (Eds.), *Routledge Encyklopedia of Narrative Theory* (pp. 339-348). London, New York: Routledge.

TRABASSO, T., SECCO, T., & VAN DEN BROEK, P. (1982). Causal Cohesion and Story Coherence. In Mandl, H., Stein, N. L., & Trabasso, T. (Eds.), *Learning and comprehension of text* (p. 1-44). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum.

VITZ, P. C. (1990). The Use of Stories in Moral Development. *American Psychologist*, *45* (6), 709-720.

WESTBY, C. E. (1984). Development of narrative language abilities. In Wallach, G. P., & Butler, K. G. (Eds.), *Language learning disabilities in schoolage children* (pp. 103-127). Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins.

ZAJACOVÁ, S. (2005). Narácia detí predškolského veku. In Sičáková, Ľ., & Liptáková, Ľ. (Eds.), *Slovo o* slove. Zborník Katedry komunikačnej a literárnej výchovy Pedagogickej fakulty Prešovskej university (pp. 73-83). Prešove: Katedra komunikačnej a literárnej výchovy Pedagogickej fakulty Prešovskej univerzity v Prešove.