

LEARNING KITS: AN ALTERNATIVE WAY TO IMPROVE NARRATIVE WRITING

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Attempts to improve students' narrative writing skills can be problematic. This is partly due to the teaching methods some teachers employ in the classroom. This article discusses the effect of learning kits on student performance in narrative writing. It also examines students' perceptions toward the use of learning kits. Results from three experiments and a questionnaire indicate that student performance in narrative writing increased significantly when learning kits were used and students thought learning kits were interesting and helpful.

At Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, every freshman (except those from the Faculty of Arts) is required to take the Foundation English I (FE I) course offered by the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI). This is a three-credit course and focuses on four skills; namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In terms of writing, students are assigned to write narrative paragraphs. Most students know that narration, or storytelling, is used extensively in various forms of entertainment, such as novels, films and short stories. Of all genres of writing, narrative is the easiest to produce because it is the closest to oral communication. However, there are still elements for students to learn before they can enhance their narrative writing skills.

When writing a narrative piece, learners need to develop an awareness of narrative writing while the teacher incorporates explicit language teaching, focusing on grammar to enable to make “conscious choices in the way they organize and write texts” (Knapp & Watkins, 1994:30). In addition, to accomplish a narrative writing lesson, teachers are faced with the need to make decisions about what and how to teach. As the literature on teaching methodology makes clear, this is not an easy task. Over the years researchers and academics have conducted extensive research on teaching strategies to help students improve their writing skills. With respect to the FE I course, although texts and worksheets are supplied to all teachers, they aim to practice on the so-called paper-and-pencil exercises found in most texts. These exercises are typical and students are familiar with them. However, since there is nothing new or challenging in terms of the format of the exercises, students can get bored easily and that can prevent them from learning. Therefore, teachers need to find ways to motivate students to learn. Researchers maintain that learning kits motivate learners because they are intrinsically more interesting or stimulating than exercises found in course books and supplementary materials. They make learning more enjoyable and therefore more motivating (Hoodecheck, 1990; Parker, 1988; Scott, 1994).

According to Parker (1988) learning kits literally mean a set or collection of tools, supplies, instructional matters etc., used to promote and encourage learning. Learning kits are also used to enhance thinking skills essential for increasing in-depth comprehension. With flexibility in use, students are allowed to work either with the teacher or by themselves. Consequently, incorporating learning kits in narrative writing lessons may help students develop skills useful for narrative writing. The significance of this study, hence, lies in terms of the attempt to find a way to aid students in writing a narrative piece. Since the teaching of narrative writing consists of four elements: past forms, sequence, time markers and story grammar, we then created our learning kits according to these four elements. They were first evaluated, tried out, and adjusted before being used in the study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Learning Kits

Past Forms. As we know that narrative usually involves an event which happened in the past, the tenses used in writing a story mostly include the past simple, past perfect and past continuous tense. However, correctly using the past form of a verb can be confusing for EFL learners. Learning kits give learners greater opportunity to become familiar with the past forms. The first activity provides students with verbs in both base forms and past forms (past simple and past participle). The verbs are divided into two sets according to their past forms. Yellow cards contain verbs with regular past forms while green cards contain verbs with irregular past forms. The base form is presented on one side of the card whereas the past forms are presented on the other. The activity is suitable for either one user or several users. For example, an individual can work alone by looking at the base form of each word and guess the past form on the back of the card. In small groups, student can take turns guessing the past forms of the words and find the winner who knows the most correct answers.

The second and third activities are similar to cloze exercises. That is, students are required to fill in the blanks with the given verbs which are in past forms. Students, then, need to read and understand the assigned story in order to choose the most appropriate verb for each blank. For the second activity, there are ten blanks and ten verbs. The incomplete story is written on a big colorful chart and the given verbs are written on separate cards. On the chart, there are envelopes in which students can put the verb cards to complete the story. Although the second and third activities are similar as students are asked to fill in the blanks with verbs in past forms, the focus of the two activities are not the same. Unlike the second activity which focusses on past simple tense, the third activity aims to give students practice on the past continuous and past perfect tenses. Therefore, the activities vary in terms of the level of difficulty.

Sequence. In the writing process, most writers learn that writing ideas in some kind of "logical order" is necessary to achieve coherence. Also, when writing a narrative, the writer often arranges facts in chronological order. Therefore, to help the reader move through a narration, the writer must have a clear understanding of the events involved in each step and be able to explain them in a

logical order. In addition, the writer should carefully arrange the sequence of events to make the content of the story clear to the reader.

There are four different activities in this part of the learning kit set. Each activity aims to develop and extend the student's ability to put their ideas for narrative writing into the correct chronological order. There are similarities between the first two activities. First, both of them are matching activities of pictures and stories cut into strips. The essence of this activity is the observation of the relationship between each picture and each stripped story. Both activities require students to match pictures with stripped stories and then arrange all of them into the correct order from the beginning to the end of the story. In the first activity, *Cow Story*, there are four pictures to be matched with four stripped stories. However, in the second activity, *Snake Story*, there are four pictures for six stripped stories. Students have to decide which stripped stories belong to which picture before arranging all of them into the correct order. *Snake Story* is considered a little more difficult than *Cow Story* since the number of the pictures do not correspond to the number of the stripped stories.

The gist of the third activity is again to reinforce the ability to sequence story events chronologically. This activity also shows that narrative writing usually takes part in almost all types of writing in the real world such as writing a personal letter. For this activity, *Roni's Letter*, students first read Roni's letter which is a reply to her parents' which they accidentally found in the garage. After reading and understanding the message in Roni's letter, students are required to compose "a letter to Roni" to describe what her parents did and also what they found. Students must decide which events occurred first, second, third and so on. Again, there are stripped stories provided for them to fill in the gaps in order to complete the story. Finally, students need to rearrange the objects Roni's parents found in the correct order by putting number one-five in front of each object.

The last activity, *Detective Alibi*, introduces the sequencing concept and skill to students with another unique form of narrative story. Students pretend to be detectives investigating a robbery that took place in a museum one night. First, they read the incomplete story written on a big chart saying, "A very valuable painting was stolen from the museum last night. The police

think the thief must have used objects in the room to carry out the robbery as all visitors are searched when they enter the museum. When the museum close at five, the thief stayed behind... "Since the story is incomplete, students are required to complete it by filling the stripped stories provided into the gaps on the chart. To achieve this, they have to look for the context clues to find out the correct strip for each gap. They also have to process their sequencing skills as well as critical thinking skills to predict what is the first, second, and third actions that the robber did in the museum in order to steal the painting. To help the student question about the sequence of events, there are also strips of questions for them to check whether they put their ideas into the right order.

Time markers. In a narrative text, various "cohesive devices" are needed to make connections and signal relationships in order to show that the story is coherent. Since narration relies on time or chronology, teaching narrative writing must involve introducing students to time markers, the conjunctions that indicate the chronological order of an event. Time markers are responsible for linking one event to another', therefore, a narration without time markers certainly lacks cohesion. The appropriate use of time markers not only helps the writer organize their ideas more systematically but also enables readers to follow the story more easily. To help students use time markers correctly, teachers must focus not only on teaching the meaning of the word, but also the functions of the time markers and the grammatical patterns (Sermsongswad, 1984).

This learning kit set is composed of four activities. It is recommended that students start studying the first activity, *Picture Cards*, before working on other activities. *Picture Cards* is designed to help students review their knowledge in using time markers. Each card contains pictures with a sample sentence containing a time marker. There is also a sentence pattern underneath the sample sentence. The pictures are added to help elaborate the meaning of the time markers and their relationship with the chronological order of the event presented. In addition, sentence patterns are also provided since most students already know the meaning of the time markers, but they may not know how to place them in sentences. In this activity, the students can review the use of each time marker in a sentence individually or discuss it in small groups.

Card Game is designed to enhance student understanding of time markers and the relationship of clauses connected by time markers. It also aims at promoting their recognition of

punctuation such as the use of commas. The activity contains two stacks of cards (13 each). These cards are categorized according to the type of clause, whether they are subordinate clauses or main clauses. The rules of this game are flexible and it can be used individually or in small groups. If the students do not have much time or only two students are involved, they can just match the subordinate clauses with the main clauses. However, if time allows and three to five people are involved, they can follow the rules described in the instruction card; each person will get two to three cards containing "main clauses" (the number of cards can be more or less depending on the number of people). The rest of the cards will be placed in the middle beside the other stack of cards containing "subordinate clauses." They will put their clauses on the table facing up so that everybody in the group can see. Then, each one takes a turn opening a card containing a subordinate clause in the stack. If the clause matches with the main clause that they have, they can take another card from the main clause stack. If not, they have to put the card with a subordinate clause back in the middle so that others can see if that card matches theirs. This will continue until all of the clauses are matched. During the game, it is recommended that the students show both the clauses they have and those they get later to the members in the group so that others can help them decide whether they are the right match. This will promote discussion and interaction among the students.

The third activity, *Snow White*, focuses on more advanced skills in time marker usage and logical thinking. The story contains ten sentences; however, all of the clauses are separated and all of the time markers are cut out from the subordinate clauses. Students are first required to match the right clauses together with the use of correct time markers. This will enhance their understanding of the meaning of the clauses connected by time markers. The recognition of capitalization and punctuation marks will make the task easier. After matching clauses, they have to put the sentences in chronological order. Their background knowledge in the story will also help.

The last activity is *The Story of Lynn* which is similar to a cloze passage in which students choose correct words given and fill in the blanks. However, although it seems to be like a traditional practice test, the change from working on a piece of paper to a big colorful chart will catch students' attention. In this activity, all of the time markers are printed in capital letters;

therefore, to be able to complete the task, the students have to rely only on meaning and tenses and then choose the most appropriate time markers to fill in the blanks.

Story Grammar. Story grammar can be defined as “an idealized internal representation of the parts of a typical story and the relationships among those parts” (Mandler & Johnson, 1977:111). It is a set of rules that define both a text’s structure and an individual’s mental representation of story structure. There are currently four major story grammars developed by Mandler and Johnson (1977), Rumelhart (1978), Stein and Glenn (1979), and Thorndyke (1977). In this paper, only Stein and Glenn’s story grammar is discussed. According to their grammar, the information in a well-informed narrative can be broken down into six categories as follows (Stein, 1979):

1. *Setting:* Introduction of the protagonist which can contain information about physical, social or temporal context in which the remainder of the story occurs.
2. *Initiating event:* An action, an internal event or a natural occurrence which serves to initiate or to cause a response in the protagonist.
3. *Internal response:* An emotion, cognition or goal of the protagonist.
4. *Attempt:* An overt attempt to obtain the protagonist’s goal
5. *Consequence:* An event, action or end state which marks the attainment or non-attainment of the protagonist’s goal.
6. *Reaction:* An emotion, a cognition, an action or an end state expressing the protagonist’s feelings about his or her goal attainment or relating the broader consequential realm of the protagonist’s goal attainment.

Story grammar has always been recognized as important for learning and instruction in both narrative reading and writing. Developing students’ overall understanding of an ideal story structure allows them to grasp main ideas, summarize, recall and better understand relationships among story parts.

In this learning kit set, the first three of five stories are for students to learn the six story components of story grammar. The other two stories are for them to practice. First, students learn the definition of the story components and read story parts which correspond to each component. The first activity aims to ensure that students understand story structure and can apply it to a real

story. Later, in the second activity, students read various story parts written on separate cards. Again, events in the story are accompanied by the corresponding category labels. Unlike the first activity, the definition of the story components is not shown. However, if students do not remember or understand what each component is, they can always go back to the first activity and recheck its definition. While doing this activity, students can allocate attention to various aspects of the story and its story elements. For the third activity, story parts are also written on separate cards. Their corresponding story components are given on the back of each card so that students cannot see them while reading the sentences on the front of the cards. The purpose of this activity is to encourage students to read the sentences of the story and identify their story components before checking the answer on the back of the cards. Finally, in the last two activities, stories are separated into story grammar categories and jumbled. Students then read the scrambled story and reorder it by matching the story parts with the given story components labeled on separate cards attached to a board.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

One hundred and twenty-two first-year Chulalongkorn University students enrolled in FE I volunteered to participate in this study. The purpose was to investigate the effect of learning kits on student achievement in narrative writing skills. The study was divided into three parts. In part one, two groups of students from the Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy were randomly designated as learning kit plus (LP) and non-learning kit (NL) groups. The LP group was taught how to write a narrative paragraph using learning kits as well as other course materials and worksheets assigned for every student in the course. The NL group was taught using only the course materials and worksheets, not the learning kits.

In part two, while one group of political science students was randomly designate as the LP group, the other group of students from the same faculty was designed as the learning kit group (LK). The LK group was taught using only the learning kits without any other course materials or worksheets. This was done to examine if the learning kits should be used alone or along with the more traditional forms of worksheets in helping students effectively improve their narrative writing skills.

In part three, one group of political science students was randomly designated as the LK group and the other as the NL group. The objective of this part was to determine whether students who used the learning kits alone would perform better in writing a narrative piece than those who used worksheets alone.

Each group in all of the three parts was given a pre-test followed by three hours of instruction over a three week period and then took the same test again as a post-test. For both the pre-test and the post-test, the students were asked to write a well-organized paragraph of 150-200 words describing their worst or most wonderful experience. Three raters were asked to rate each student's text on a holistic scale from zero to ten. The interrater reliability was calculated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and it was found that the first reliability coefficients were 0.760-0.821, $p < 0.05$ and the second reliability coefficients were 0.764-0.848, $p < 0.05$. In addition to the pre-and post-test, after the students in the LK and LP groups had finished each set of learning kits, they were asked to answer a questionnaire to evaluate the learning kits in terms of design and content, as well as student perception of the learning kits.

RESULTS

The results are summarized in Tables One, Two, and Three below. In the first experiment, the difference in mean scores between the pre-and post-test of both LP and NL groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). However, when compared the mean scores of the post-test of both groups, it was found that there was a statistical difference between the LP and NL groups. This indicates that students gain more benefit from using the learning kits when learning to write a narrative. In addition, the results from the second experiment revealed that there was a significant difference between the pre-and post-test score of both LP and LK groups ($p < 0.05$). However, the results also indicated that students in the LP group performed better than those in the LK group. In the third experiment, the mean scores of the pre-and post-test of the LK group was also statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, a t-test showed that students from LK group benefited more than those from the NL group.

Table 1: Results from a t-test for Pretest Scores

Part	Group	N	Pretest	df	t-value
			X (S.D)		
I	LP	22	3.45 (1.22)	42	0.260
	NL	22	3.36 (1.09)		
II	LP	19	3.74 (0.93)	36	1.055
	LK	19	4.05 (0.91)		
III	LK	20	4.80 (0.83)	38	0.521
	NL	20	4.60 (1.50)		

Table 2: Results from a t-test for Posttest Scores

Part	Group	N	Post-test	df	t-value
			X (S.D)		
I	LP	22	6.41 (1.01)	42	8.348*
	NL	22	3.73 (1.12)		
II	LP	19	6.68 (1.16)	36	2.107*
	LK	19	5.84 (1.30)		
III	LK	20	7.10 (1.17)	38	6.684*
	NL	20	4.80 (1.01)		

*p<0.05

Table 3: Gain Scores from Pre-and Posttest of Each Group

Part	Group	N	X (S.D)	df	t-value
			Pretest Post-test		
I	LP	22	3.45 (1.22) 6.41 (1.01)	21	11.802*
	NL	22	3.36 (1.09) 3.73 (1.12)		
II	LP	19	3.74 (0.93) 6.68 (1.16)	18	13.240*
	LK	19	4.05 (0.91) 5.84 (1.30)		
III	LK	20	4.80 (0.83) 7.10 (1.17)	19	11.898*
	NL	20	4.60 (1.50) 4.80 (1.01)		

*p<0.05

Students' Perceptions

All groups of students taught by using the learning kits reported they enjoyed learning to write a narrative through learning kits because they differed from worksheets and handouts. They liked the colorful pictures and charts which in fact motivated them to learn to write a narrative. They also pointed out that learning kits could be used either as self-study material or as a medium of instruction for whole groups. In addition, the students indicated that the learning kits helped them improve their writing skills by leading them clearly to achieve narrative elements required to write a narrative.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study clearly indicate that to teach narrative writing using learning kits can be successful in an EFL teaching situation. This may be because learning kits provide students with visual aids like pictures which allow them to better conceptualize the narrative writing process. In addition, learning kits encourage students to be creative and have fun. They give students choices to work either in groups, in pairs or by themselves. Although learning kits are more beneficial when combined with worksheets, they can still be used alone and students are able to make more use of them than worksheets. Therefore, teachers should consider employing learning kits in their narrative writing class.

The fact that the group without learning kits showed no significant improvement may be because of the short period of instruction. Since worksheets require students to focus on more concrete points, a much longer period of instruction may be needed before they can see how these concrete points can lead to narrative writing. Furthermore, completing worksheets or any other traditional supplementary sheets is not exciting or encouraging when compared with using learning kits. Consequently, it is hard to motivate students while learning through worksheets. However, as this study has only shown the benefits of using learning kits when learning to write narrative, further research is necessary to determine to what extent student can benefit from learning kits when learning to write different genres, such as expository writing.

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