

Original Paper

A Narrative Analysis of Graduate Students' Academic Writing Experiences across Two Languages: English and Arabic

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Abstract

This study examines how Arabic and English narratives are constructed by Saudi Arabic speakers. The data consist of interviews with five Saudi Arabic speakers studying for their master's degrees in different fields at various universities in the USA. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, and the interviewees were asked to tell a story and later retell the same story but in English. Interestingly, the role of the narratives went beyond mentioning events to include social roles. Furthermore, the interviewees used external evaluation and embedded evaluation in the Arabic versions of the narratives and only external evaluation in the English versions. Additionally, the effects of the participants' fields of study, saving face, attempting to avoid ambiguity, and reinforcing the point of the story are possible reasons why some interviewees produced longer versions of the narratives. Finally, the English narratives did not include the historical present, which could be attributed to the effect of L1.

Keywords

Interviews, narrative, Saudi Arabic speakers, narrative construction, retelling

1. Introduction

Narratives are considered to be a central means by which people make sense of their world and experiences (Johnstone, 2001). In addition, narratives play a major role in the culture of humans since they appear in "novels, short stories, poetic and prose epic, film, folk tale, interviews, oral memoirs, chronicles, history, comic strips, graphic novels and other visual media" (Labov, 2011, p. 546).

Since narratives require at least two people (a speaker and a listener), they can be said to play an important role in social action. Due to globalization, we encounter different languages and cultures. Those languages and cultures require certain patterns. Therefore, second-language learners should be equipped with the linguistic skills and pragmatic competence to be able to communicate successfully.

Unfortunately, teachers of second languages tend to focus mainly on grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and phonology and neglect to teach students how to tell narratives and to share their personal stories. This eventually leads to breakdowns in conversations between native speakers and non-native speakers (Junqueira, 2010).

Various researchers have addressed different aspects of narratives. For the most part, the focus has been on narratives told in one language only (e.g., Minami, 2002; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Ries, 1997). Additionally, Koven (2002) points out that there is a dearth in the literature on tellings of the same story. Since “storytelling is even claimed to be more effective in language teaching than traditional teaching materials, such as textbooks” (Lucarevski, 2016, p. 23) and because very little research has been done on Arabic narratives and comparing the structures of English and Arabic narratives, this study seeks to shed some light on the structure of Arabic narratives and highlight similarities and differences in conventions between Arabic and American English narratives created by Labov and Waletzky (1967).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Narrative

Several definitions of the term *narrative* have been suggested. Labov and Waletzky (1967), for example, define *narrative* as “one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred” (pp. 359-360). By the same token, Mistry (1993) defines *narrative* as “all types of discourse in which event structured material is shared with readers or listeners, including fictional stories, personal narratives, accounts and recounts of events (real or imagined)” (p. 208).

Moreover, narratives are used by human beings to interpret the world around them – we lead storied lives (Riessman, 1993). In other words, narratives are considered representatives of the identities of those who narrate them. Moreover, Schegloff (1997) indicates that people produce narratives to explain, boast, complain, etc.

Ochs and Capps (2001) define personal narrative as “a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience” (p. 2). Personal narratives can be used for the purpose of analysing how different narrators shape the telling of a narrative. Moreover, personal narratives are used to show how life events are structured through narrative form. In addition to how narrators shape their telling of narratives, personal narratives can be used to shed light on how narrators address the life events mentioned in the narratives. Therefore, personal narratives provide information about the narrated life events.

2.2 Structure of Narrative

According to Labov and Waletzky (1967, 1997), verbal narratives have a common structure (a beginning, a middle, and an end). They claim that:

In our opinion, it will not be possible to make very much progress in the analysis and understanding of

these complex narratives until the simplest and most fundamental narrative structures are analysed in direct connection with their originating functions. We suggest that such fundamental structures are to be found in oral versions of personal experiences: not the products of expert storytellers that have been retold many times, but the original production of a representative sample of the population (Labov & Waletzky, 1997, p. 3).

In addition, Labov and Waletzky (1967, 1997) indicate that fully formed narratives will contain the following elements: Abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result, and coda.

1- Abstract

This is usually a clause or two where the narrator presents a summary of the entire story. In other words, it answers the question, “what was this about?” It is generally found at the beginning of narratives.

2- Orientation

This element presents background information, such as the time, place, people involved, and activity or situation of the narrative. It answers the questions of who, what, where, and when? Labov and Waletzky (1967) note that it is common to find the clauses in this section written in the past progressive tense.

3- Complicating action

This section deals with the action in the narrative. The narrator interprets what occurred from his/her point of view. It is considered the main part of the narrative. Many of the clauses in this section contain progressive verbs.

4- Evaluation

Labov and Waletzky (1967) refer to evaluation as “the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d’être*: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at” (p. 367). There are four types of evaluation: 1) External evaluation, 2) Embedding evaluation, 3) Evaluative action, and 4) Evaluation by suspension.

5- Result or resolution

This section reveals what ultimately happened in the narrative. The narrator begins discussing the outcome of the action before finishing his/her narrative with the coda.

6- Coda

This is one of the ways in which the narrator shows that the narrative is finished. The coda may come in the form of general observations or show the effect of the events.

As seen from the above, the structure of narratives consists of different sections. These sections present different kinds of information. Each section, of course, has a different function within the narrative.

2.3 *Telling and Retelling Narratives*

Koven (2002) points out that literature on tellings of the same story is sparse. However, several researchers have touched on told and retold narratives and the effect of the retelling process on the narratives. Focusing on a story of a disagreement between a teacher and a parent, Keats-Whelan, Huber, Rose, Davies and Clandinin (2001) conclude that narratives told in the workplace will be different

when those narratives are retold outside that workplace. In addition, in a study by Syrjala and Estola (1999), telling and retelling narratives stressed various ethical aspects related to life and teaching (e.g., what we hope to achieve in our lives and jobs). In the same vein, Hermans (1992) points out that retelling will eventually lead to changes in the characteristics of the narratives.

2.4 Narratives in Different Languages

Various studies have been conducted of narratives in different languages. For example, Ries (1997) examines Russian narratives, Minami (2002) analyses Japanese narratives, McCabe and Bliss (2003) explore Spanish narratives, Özyıldırım (2009) studies the structure of Turkish narratives, Rodríguez Louro and Ritz (2014) investigate Australian narratives, and Hasson (2018) looks at American narratives. Although they are not prevalent, there are some studies that examine narratives produced in two different languages by the same speakers. Rifkin (2002), for example, investigates how American learners produce narratives in Russian. Moreover, Junqueira (2010) compares Brazilian Portuguese and American English.

2.5 Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the following questions:

- How do Saudi Arabic speakers construct their narratives?
- What are the differences, if any, between the same speaker telling a narrative in Arabic and retelling the same narrative in English in terms of the narrative's constructions and evaluation types?

3. Research Design

3.1 Methodology The current study is a part of a large study about academic writing experiences of some graduate students. A semi-structured qualitative interview was selected to provide the opportunity to introduce the topic to the interviewees and guide the discussion to answer the research questions. All the questions were generated by the researcher, and the interviewees were given space to express their opinions freely. The interview involved a preliminary descriptive examination of the students' experiences in academic writing.

Five interviews were conducted. All the interviews were tape-recorded and varied in length from 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were informal and open-ended and were carried out in a conversational style. The narratives in the interviews were transcribed and then analysed according to the narrative framework proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (2004, 2011). Moreover, the narratives told in Arabic were translated by the researcher himself.

3.2 Interview-style Narration

According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), the narrative process seeks to collect data to describe lives, and the narrative analysis can be applied to an in-depth interview. Narratives told in interviews are considered a main tool for researchers who prefer to conduct their studies qualitatively. Although interviews are viewed as a somewhat artificial context, De Fina (2009) asserts that interviews are interactional events, not artificial social encounters. In addition, narratives elicited from interviews can

be controlled for topic and, to a degree, for items and structures elicited.

3.3 Participants

The participants in this study consisted of five Saudi males who were native speakers of Arabic and fluent English speakers. They had studied English for at least 9 years. The participants had bachelor's degrees from different universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At the time of the study, they were pursuing master's degrees in different fields (English, engineering, and business) at various universities in the American Southwest. Those who majored in English achieved an overall Band Score of 6.5 at least, the other participants achieved 5.5-6.0. In addition, the participants were all in their late twenties to early thirties.

The participants were known to the researcher, and they were selected based on their language proficiency. Their English proficiency was important in the current study to ensure that no communication breakdowns caused by language difficulties might occur during the narrative telling. Therefore, this study used non-probability sampling; the participants were not selected randomly (Koven, 2004).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Narratives' Construction Elements

Analysing both the Arabic and the English narratives showed that they have the same narrative construction elements that Labov and Waletzky (1967) noted. The following construction elements appeared in the narratives: the abstract, orientation, complicating action, results, and coda. Table 1 shows a comparison between the English and Arabic versions of the narratives in terms of the occurring elements.

Table 1. Narrative Construction Elements in Both Narratives

	Abstract	Orientation	Complicating action	Results	Coda
Arabic	1	4	5	4	3
English	none	5	5	5	4

Table. 2 Summary of both Arabic and English Narratives

Participant	Structure of Arabic narrative	Structure of English narrative
1	abstract, orientation, complicating action, result, coda	orientation, complicating action, result, coda
2	complicating action, result, coda	orientation, complicating action, result, coda
3	orientation, complicating action, coda	orientation, complicating action, result, coda
4	orientation, complicating action, result	orientation, complicating action, result
5	orientation, complicating action, result	orientation, complicating action, result, coda

Only one Arabic narrative had an abstract. The absence of this element in the English narratives could be attributed to the effect of L1 (Arabic). Additionally, the presence of an abstract in only one narrative of 10 (both the Arabic and English narratives) might indicate that Saudi Arabic speakers prefer not to include abstracts in their narratives to suspend the action and garner the most attention possible from the audience. This, attracting attention and suspending the action, could mean that the role of narratives goes beyond mentioning events to include social roles.

In contrast to the findings of Junqueira (2010), who noted that the orientation element was mentioned throughout her participants' narratives, the participants in the current study listed the orientation materials only at the beginning of their narratives.

4.2 Evaluation

According to Labov (1972), the evaluation element and evaluation devices have two functions: 1) suspending the action and 2) showing the point of the narrative. As Table 3 illustrates, the participants used different types of evaluation in the Arabic narratives and only one type of evaluation in the English ones. Moreover, the participants tended to use more types of evaluation in the Arabic narratives than in the English ones. The participants included two types of evaluation in the Arabic narratives: external evaluation and embedded evaluation. In the English narratives, however, they used only external evaluation.

Table 3. Distribution of Evaluation Types

Participants	Narratives	External evaluation	Embedded evaluation
1	Arabic Narratives	none	none
	English Narratives	*	none
2	Arabic Narratives	*	*
	English Narratives	none	none
3	Arabic Narratives	*	*
	English Narratives	*	none
4	Arabic Narratives	none	*
	English Narratives	*	none
5	Arabic Narratives	*	none
	English Narratives	*	none

Participant one used external evaluation for the first time ("it was a surprise to me"). In contrast, participant two used two types of evaluation in the Arabic version and none in the English version. The used types were embedded evaluation (e.g., "my professor said: I did not understand what you want to say here") and external evaluation (e.g., "my Arabic sentences are very good"). In addition, both narratives of participant three included different types of evaluation. The English narrative contained

external evaluation (e.g., “makes the paper read more easily”). Moreover, two types of evaluation were used by the participant in the Arabic narrative: embedded evaluation (e.g., “my professor said: this was wrong”) and external evaluation (e.g., “they provided me with steps that might be very good in their field”). Moreover, both narratives of participant four included different types of evaluation. In the English narrative, for example, the participant produced external evaluation, such as, “but I was shocked because I never received any feedback”. Embedded evaluation was also used by the participant in the Arabic version of the narrative (e.g., “and my friend said I was showing off by using the words usually used in academic books and journal articles”). Concerning the evaluation types, participant five used external evaluation in the Arabic narrative (e.g., “his style of writing was better than mine”); however, he did not include any evaluation type in the English narrative.

Labov (1972) claims that older men tend to use embedded evaluation; the findings of the current study confirm that claim since the participants, who were in their late twenties to early thirties, did not use embedded evaluation in their English versions of the narratives. However, 60% of the participants used embedded evaluation in their Arabic versions of the narratives.

4.3 Lengths of the Narratives

The lengths of the participants’ narratives (in both Arabic and in English) varied. Table 4 provides more information.

Table 4. Lengths of both Arabic and English Narratives

Participant	Lengths of narratives
1	Arabic version is longer (93 vs. 88 words)
2	English version is longer (88 vs. 34 words)
3	Arabic version is longer (121 vs. 107 words)
4	Arabic version is longer (140 vs. 68 words)
5	English version is longer (111 vs. 73)

Since Arabic was the mother tongue of the participants, it was expected that the Arabic versions of the narratives would be longer than the English versions. Surprisingly, not all the participants produced longer versions of the Arabic narratives, as seen in Table 4. Possible reasons why participants might have produced longer versions of their narratives in either language are as follows:

- Effects of the participants' fields of study. The two participants who had longer versions of English narratives were majoring in linguistics and Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESOL). As a result, they may have wanted to show the interviewer that they were good speakers of English.
- Saving face. On the other end of the scale, most of those whose Arabic narratives were longer than their English ones were studying fields other than English and may not have been confident in their level of English, which made them omit many details in their English versions of the narratives. For example, in the complicating action element of the English version of his narrative, participant three did not provide the full details he gave in the Arabic narrative. In the English narrative, he talked about the problem with his professor, who could not understand the points he was making. In the Arabic narrative, however, he talked about the role of the writing centre. According to the participant, the tutors in the writing centre told him to follow certain steps in structuring his paper, which his professor refused to accept. The participant said that he faced a dilemma and decided to follow his professor's suggestions rather than those of the writing centre. Omitting some of these events in the complicating action in addition to the result part from the English narrative could have been an attempt by the participant to avoid subjecting himself to embarrassment regarding the use of some English words and grammatical structures.
- Repeating the same ideas in different words could have been an attempt to avoid ambiguity. For example, one of the participants said, "my professor faced some problems understanding what I was writing". Then, he repeated the same idea using different words: "in some sentences, she could not understand anything". Only the first sentence appeared in the Arabic version of the narrative.
- By repeating different words and phrases, the participants may have sought to constantly reinforce the point of the story, using a variety of different mechanisms to convince the listener that the point of their narrative was worth communicating.

4.4 The Historical Present

Labov (1972) and Georgakopoulou and Goutsos (1997) point out that the historical present is one of the primary characteristics of conversational stories across cultures. The narratives in the current study, however, did not include any uses of the historical present. The tenses used were the simple past, past progressive, and past perfect.

The findings of the current study differ from those of Koven's study (1998), which highlighted that the historical present is commonly employed in French narratives, and Levey's (2006) and Rodríguez Louro and Ritz's (2014) studies outlined that the historical present is used in British English and Australian English narratives, respectively. Similar to the findings in Junqueira's study (2010), who claims that Brazilian storytelling does not include the historical present, the participants in this study did not include the historical present in their narratives. Since American narratives include the historical present (Junqueira, 2010), the absence of the historical present in the English narratives in the current study could be attributed to the effect of L1.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

The analysis of the excerpts has demonstrated how Saudi Arabic speakers construct their narratives in both Arabic and English. The interviewees showed similarities in constructing their narratives. However, only one narrative included an abstract, which could mean that Saudi Arabic speakers tend to include an abstract for the purpose of attracting attention and suspending the action. As a result, it can be said that narratives by Saudi speakers go beyond mentioning events to include social roles.

More types of evaluation were employed in the Arabic narratives than in the English ones. On one hand, the participants used two types in the Arabic narratives: external evaluation and embedded evaluation. On the other hand, the English narratives, however, included only external evaluation.

In addition, the effect of the participants' fields of study, saving face, attempting to avoid ambiguity, and reinforcing the point of the story are possible reasons why the participants may have produced longer versions of the narratives in either language (English or Arabic). Finally, a likely effect of L1 could be seen in the absence of the historical present from the English narratives in the current study.

Factors such as the limited number of respondents and the lack of American respondents to evaluate the stories told by fluent English speakers may affect interpretation of the outcomes. In addition, there were no native English speakers to evaluate the efficacy and reportability of the fluent English speakers' narratives. Documenting how native speakers interpret these tales would be exciting and informative. Future studies should therefore incorporate native English-speaking listeners and/or advisors to explore the efficacy and appropriateness of Saudi Arabic participants' stories.

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