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# An Analysis of EFL Narrative Structure and Foreign Language Proficiency*

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## Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the probable differences between narratives as rehearsed by EFL language learners of two different English proficiencies. It aimed to find out how narrative elements (*abstract, orientation, main action, results*, and *coda*) are recounted differently by EFL language learners of different English proficiencies. To this end, 250 personal oral narratives were recorded through classroom discussions and interviews. Two hundred participants were asked to narrate a personal story in the classroom, and the other 50 were interviewed. The analysis focused on narratives structure to discover how knowledge of target language might affect the way language learners construct English narratives. The collected data were interpreted according to Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) analytical models. The results revealed that upper-intermediate language learners reported more organized, chronological, logical, and to the point stories than pre-intermediate ones. The difference was in *orientation, main action,* and *result* parts. Neither group of language learners expressed the *abstract* and *coda* sections.

**Keywords:** Narratives Structure, Abstract, Orientation, Main action, Results, Coda

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## Introduction

The aim of language teaching and learning is to prepare language learners to use the target language in real world situations, and narratives are part of any conversation in community (Labov, 1997). The ability to recount narratives helps language learners to deal with real world situations when they become a part of society in which a second language is needed to achieve communicative goals. Narratives are similar to the real world situations more than any other manipulated tasks.

Narrative inquiry emphasizes the stories which teachers and students narrate in the classroom which are mostly about their lived experiences as rehearsed in oral or written forms. Teachers normally talk about their professional development in their career, and language learners recount stories about their lived and imagined experiences (Barkhuizen, 2014). In research era, teachers' narratives are elicited for professional purposes, identity studies, and educational improvement. The present study focuses on learners' narratives to find out how different language proficiency levels might affect them.

Critical pedagogical approaches encourage the use of teachers' narratives as a means of developing teaching skills (Barkhuizen, 2008; Hewson, 2007), and the use of students' narratives as a source of information for designing appropriate teaching programs (Thornbury, 2000). However, narratives have not widely been recognized as potentially powerful learning strategies in other areas of the curriculum, particularly in developing valuable sociopragmatic skills (Thornbury & Slade, 2006). The incorporation of narratives into the curriculum offers teachers demonstrably effective means in their efforts to negotiate high-stakes environments such as workplace settings. Weinstein (1999) mentioned that the learners' stories can be used in L2 classrooms as a means to develop language learners' abilities. The learners' lived experiences can be a part of curriculum as they are of interest to the learners and create a sense of friendship. Wajnryb (2003) proposed three ways to incorporate learners' narratives in language classrooms, i.e. stories as language means, genre, and storied classroom. Storied

classroom in her terms was using storytelling to establish class cohesion and community.

Language learners' lived narratives are rich sources of authentic material as they are purposeful, focus on real life experiences, help to interact better in the classrooms, and involve language learners in communicative tasks (Guariento & Morely, 2001). Furthermore, storytelling is a powerful motivator for language learners to participate in class activities. Essig (2005) asserted that sharing of personal experiences might have positive influence on language learning. Language learners like lived stories which are real and new for them. As the definition of narrative shows, stories have some reportable events in them that the narrator finds interesting to tell, and the recipient finds interesting to hear. Narratives are not similar to the prefabricated texts which are not much interesting for language learners. Additionally, narratives are language learners' experiences that happen in the context and culture in which the learners live. The learners understand them easily and make a good relationship with them.

**Theoretical Framework**

New approaches within narrative inquiry focus on the content of stories (e.g. Mishler, 1995; Elliot, 2005; Riessman, 2008; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). These scholars draw a boundary line between naturalist and constructivist approaches as the former revolves around what is said and the latter resorts to how it is said. However, the form of narratives cannot be ignored especially within applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.

In language teaching and learning context, form is as important as content since language learners have their own ideologies, thoughts, beliefs, values, and cultural codes (what are at the center of focus for content analysts). The most important issue is how to express that content.

Labovian models were criticized mostly for their focus on form and structure. The other criticism was the distinction they made between clauses. Elliott (2005) and De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012)

mentioned that clauses can have more than one function in a narrative which has remained unsolved. Although multi-functionality of narrative clauses is assumed as a drawback of Labovian models, it can be argued that it is the nature of language. Although Mishler (1995), Elliot (2005), Riessman (2008), and De Fina & Georgakopoulou (2012) believe in the focus on interaction in their narrative inquiries, most empirical research has benefited from data elicitation methods such as interviews.

Apart from Riessman (2008), other scholars did not formulate a framework for narrative inquiry in recent years. Her narrative analysis is on the whole of the narrative, on how a theme is developed. She introduces four types of narrative analysis: (a) Thematic analysis which focuses on the content of the narrative data, (b) Structure analysis which evaluates the sequences of speech acts (here she even resorts to the works by Labov (1972) and Gee), (c) Dialogic performance analysis which focuses on the context, and finally (d) Visual analysis which focuses in how images are made by the participants.

Since the present study focused on language learners as story tellers who do need to know how to express content whatsoever to be, we needed logically to take advantage of a model which was centered upon narratives organization. As analytical models revolve around natural talk which happens in everyday conversation, however, classroom setting, especially EFL one, is far different from real world context. Considering the purpose and the context of the present study, we borrowed Labovian analytical models.

**Narratives' Structure**

The analytical narrative models such as Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) maintained that a comprehensive story includes six parts which make up their structures. The first section of narratives is the *abstract*. It summarizes the stories in the very beginning of them (Norrick, 2000). The plot of stories is expressed through using the abstract (Rühlemann, 2013). General statements are recounted initially by stating the abstract (Cortazzi, 1993). However, it should be noted that it is an optional part of narratives structures (Labov & Waletzky's,

1967). Labov (2008) mentioned that abstract is normally followed by *How'd that happen*? The second part of narratives is *orientation*. It provides information about setting of the story (Cortazzi, 1993). In fact, it presents the prerequisites prior to the main action. *Time*, *place*, *setting*, and *behavior* are the elements which are elaborated in the orientation. It paves the way for reporting the stories' events (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). The orientation is that part of narratives in and through which the narrator shows that the story is a dynamic one (De Fina, 2003; Labov & Fanshel, 1997). Preconstruction occurs in the orientation. However, Labov and Waletzky (1967, p. 32) emphasized that "not all narratives have orientation section". De Fina (2003) claimed that apprehending, reconstructing, and representing the personal and social experiences are greatly done in the orientation section. Among the orientation elements, time and place have been centered upon more than others (Baynham, 2003; Herman, 2001) though it might be different from culture to culture (Söter, 1988).

The third part of stories is complication (also known as main action), which is "the main body of narrative clauses [that] usually comprises a series of events which may be termed complication or complicating actions" (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 32). The events which are expressed in a stream of clauses are incorporated in the complication (Cortazzi, 1993). The most reportable event which the story is centered upon is rehearsed in the complication. *What happed* is the best corresponding question for the complication. Complication is equal to the narrative's content in which an interesting event is at least needed to be told (Labov, 1972).

Narratives are told for different purposes. The narrators present their point of views in *evaluation*, where the tellers attribute the point of the story to the audience is the evaluation. It is the fourth section in the narrative. Evaluation is "the means used by narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its raison d'etre, why it was told" (Labov, 1972, p. 366). Evaluation is not studied in the present study as it should be discussed under the narratives' function which needs as much space and effort as what is needed for narratives' structures.

The fifth part of narratives is *result*. The Results or resolution expresses the results of a narrative or events. It answers the question *what finally happened?* A result is the event that happens after the main action or any other events. Although it is placed in the fifth part of narratives, the results might occur in different sections of them.

The last section of narratives is *coda* through which the narrator signals the end of story and returns the audience to the time and context in which the story is recounted. According to Labov & Waletzky (1967), most of narratives end in results, but some cases might include coda. It is one of the sections whose place is fixed in stories when there is one. Like the abstract part, the coda is optional.

The present study aims to scrutinize EFL learners' narratives to find out how English proficiency might affect their structures. Many studies such as Norrick (2000, 2003, 2005), Riessman (2000) has focused on native English stories, and Kang (2003, 2006), Lee (2003) have compared EFL learners' narratives and English ones. Less attention has been paid to EFL narrative itself to compare narratives of different language learners. Thus, the investigation of the Iranian EFL narratives structure could contribute to the area of English language teaching and narrative organization in language classes. The present study seeks to answer the following research question:

- *How do pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners recount narratives regarding their structures*?

## Method

### Design

Narratives as a branch of qualitative research are set in human lived experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry by way of interview, observation, and discussion is a data collection procedure and analysis which aims at investigating individual's world experiences. Although different methods can be used to extract lived stories, most researchers rely on unstructured interviews (Elliott, 2005). The present study used unstructured interview and classroom discussion to extract narratives. For Elliot (2005), narrative inquiries

concentrate on two approaches toward analyzing individual's experienced stories namely *a focus on content* in which the researchers go into details to discover concepts and categories and *a focus on structure* in which the researchers seek for storytelling condition, cultural bounds, and identity relations. The researchers who employ the second type of narrative inquiry borrow one or more analytical models to analyze and interpret the data. The present study focused on the structure of Iranian EFL learners' narratives. Accordingly, it took advantage of Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov (1972) analytical models in analyzing the data. According to Riessman (1993) and Coffey and Atkinson (1996), these models are the most famous ones within sociolinguistics.

Reliability and validity are two controversial concepts in qualitative research, especially in narrative inquiry (Bruner, 2002; Geelan, 2003). It is the analysis of narratives that manifests validity rather that the results of analysis. Polkinghorne (1988) mentions that validity of narrative inquiry is due to meaningful analysis of lived stories. Additionally, clear purpose of the study can surge its validity. Kvale (1996) stated that much of validity in narrative inquiry depends on the nature of research questions. The present study voice-recorded all narratives to use them as document. And also, the recorded stories were transcribed by two individuals.

Reliability means consistent results in different settings or repetition of the same study. Ferber (2000) believes that narrators recount salient parts of past experiences rather than copying them. They are the narrators' understanding of the past events. In terms of Riessman (1993), people do not mirror past experiences, but they present their understanding of them. Therefore, different witnesses of the same event might construct different narratives because people have different ideologies. This means consistency is not reasonable and meaningful in narratives. Polkinghorne (1988) focused on the trustworthiness of the note and transcription methods rather than measurement itself. Narrative inquiry seeks for broader understanding of culture. Thus, applicability of the results across samples is not of concern in narrative

inquiry (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The present study recorded the collected data, used a transcription convention, transcribed the narratives two times, and presented a thick description of method and results.

**Participants**

The present study is an attempt to compare the English narratives told by Iranian pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners. For this purpose, a sample of 250 male and female language learners who were Iranian Persian speakers learning English as a foreign language was selected. English is taught in public and private schools as a foreign language in Esfarayen, North Khorasan, Iran. The exposure to native and nonnative English users is very low. The participants of the present study were the language learners who were learning English at different private language institutes where the focus is on communication. Both male and female students who were of different social statuses, ages, and university degrees were incorporated in the study. It is necessary to point out that pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners were almost of the same mean age. Two hundred narratives were recorded when the participants were in the class before other language learners. All of the students in the classes were allowed to participate in narrative construction. The participants were asked to rehearse a personal lived story. In case they did not embark on reporting a story, some leading questions such as *have you ever been hospitalized* were addressed. Other language learners could ask questions or help the tellers when they were not able to continue telling. Fifty narratives were elicited through employing interview. To achieve the aim of the study, the participants were asked to assess their proficiency levels based on International Testing System or IELTS score band (IELTS, 2011). The levels based on IELTS are as follows:

9- Expert English user

8- Very good English user

7- Good English user

6- Competent English user

5- Modest English user

4- Limited English user

3- Extremely limited English user

2- Intermittent English user

1- Not an English user

Based on common European Reference Framework (CERF), participants are classified into three levels of English language proficiency. Those who scored themselves 1 up to 4 were considered as elementary level. Participants who assessed themselves 5 to 6 and 7 to 9 were at intermediate and advanced level respectively. Pre- and upper-intermediate language learners were selected since:

- Experts confirmed that both groups can generate narratives fluently and accurately
- It was difficult to find (real) advanced learners in EFL context
- Language learners who were lower than pre-intermediate level could not produce desired narratives.

**Data Analysis**

Although there were 250 narratives in the present study, the number of language learners who took part in the study was more than 250. All narratives were not completed because of lack of knowledge in English or other reasons such as problem in recording. All narratives were voice-recorded and transcribed two times by the researchers. In order to assure the accuracy of transcription, 15 narratives were selected randomly and checked. A transcription convention was defined to accomplish a consistency throughout the study (see appendix). Labov and Waletzkey's (1967) and Labov's (1972) analytical models were used to analyze the collected stories. The present study took the narratives structures into account. There were six sections for narratives according to the mentioned models in which evaluation is the fourth part. The evaluation was categorized as the narrative function which is

complicated as much as the narrative structure. Thus, this study was centered upon the other five sections and ignored the evaluation.

## Results

Along with presenting the results of data analysis, some examples are presented in this section. However, some examples were not mentioned completely to save space.

### The Abstract

The results of data analysis show that both groups did not recount the abstract and coda in the stories. The learners, male or female, in neither proficiency level, presented a summary at the beginning of their narratives except for a very few upper-intermediate storytellers. The participants were more eager to recapitulate the most reportable event of their story without providing any point at the beginning as an abstract precedes the story. Narratives 1 and 2 are examples in which the abstract is absent. In these narratives, which are narrated by pre- and upper-intermediate language learners, the storytellers embarked on their narratives through recounting orientation.

**Narrative 1 (male upper-intermediate language learner)**

1. About 10 or 11 years ago, I was at university with my friends @
2. And we study studied English there
3. We didn't pay attention to our lessons to our books and to our exams
4. But one time, at the end of a semester I decided to study for an exam
5. But my friends said don't study

**Narrative 2 (female Pre-intermediate language learner)**

1. Four or five years ago that we went to a trip with our family
2. And my old younger brother was about 5 years old that time
3. And we looked at shopping shops and stores to find something some clothes souvenir or something like these

**Orientation**

A common part of narratives is orientation. All collected narratives, regardless of narrators' language proficiency and age, consisted of orientation part. Time as an element of orientation was highlighted in all stories. Both groups of language learners heavily focused on time when narrating stories. Scrutinizing the narratives show that almost all storytellers initiated their narratives with the time brought up at the beginning.

**Narrative 3 (pre-intermediate)**

1. Three years ago me and my best friend
2. And we stay in a bus station bus stop
3. After after came bus
4. And we got in
5. And bus driver was so angry
6. And drive fast
7. And short time one bicycle came came in to the street
8. And bus driver stopped very fast
9. me and my best friend fall and other people fall in fall on me
10. and (…) injured my leg and broke broken my and my friend broken head his hands
11. and after that we get off my friend called his father
12. and his father came
13. and he fight with with bus driver
14. and after that we came with my father friend father to home
15. T: didn't you go to hospital?
16. No because me came to home
17. And I don't know with my friend
18. S1: you didn't know what happen for your friends

19. S2: you didn't ask your friend?
20. No, after two years I call him
21. Lots of laughs by audience
22. T: two days or years
23. Two days @@@yes yes
24. I called him
25. And he said I'm Ok

**Narrative 4 (male upper-intermediate)**

1. About two years ago, my wife, my mother in law and I came back from Ordeghan village to the city
2. I didn't drive very fast
3. Because my car (…) was not totally balanced
4. But, I knew that my car did not work well
5. It was too old
6. And I was not driving fast
7. Suddenly that I felt that my car got turbulence
8. And couldn't control it very well
9. I stopped in the road
10. And got off
11. And I checked the wheels
12. And I didn't see any problem
13. My wife and mother in law said don't go and stop here
14. It was ten kilometers to the city
15. The problem may be serious
16. But I continued driving

17. After two kilometers, near Bidvaz (it is a village) again my car had some turbulences
18. But this time, one of the cars' wheel was moving in front of me
19. I was watching it and laughing @@@
20. But my wife and her mother were screaming
21. Because my speed was low I controlled the car
22. And there wasn't any problem
23. And no one was damaged
24. And a driver helped me
25. Then I called my brother in law
26. He came and called the fixing car center
27. They came and fixed it

Narratives 3 and 4 show that both narrators of different language proficiency levels embarked on their stories through using time. As it was mentioned earlier, both groups of storytellers constantly used time in their narratives. Since these two narratives were approximately of equal lengths, they were found suitable to be analyzed in this part. In narrative 3, there appeared to be six clauses at play in addition to time. In line 2, the narrator talked about space. In lines 5 and 6, he explained the bus driver's feeling, which was a part of behavior. In line 7, he again referred to the place in which the main action happened. In lines 14 and 16, the narrator changed the place of the story from street to home. Other clauses did not relate to the orientation of the narrative. However, it should be pointed out again that time was not analyzed here as it is highly common in all narratives.

Analyzing Narrative 4 indicated that the upper-intermediate narrator exploited orientation clauses considerably more than the pre-intermediate narrator. Although the lengths of the stories were almost the same, the upper-intermediate storyteller used orientation elements nearly twice as many as what the pre-intermediate storyteller used. In

lines 1, 9, 13, 14, and 17, place was remarkably revolved around. Unlike the pre-intermediate storyteller, this narrator talked in an organized manner and did not change the place in which the main action took place. The places which he mentioned were all in one situation and highly relevant such as the departure and destination, road, and the place where the most reportable event happened. In lines 1 and 5, he elaborated on the setting in which the number of people involved in the story was explained. In lines 2, 6, 19, and 20, the narrator talked about behavior where he explained his wife and his mother-in-law's reactions to the event. It was revealed that the participants of both groups heavily focused on time and place rather than setting and behavior.

The analysis of narratives made known that language learners of higher proficiency levels provided more orientation clauses in their stories which helps the recipients understand the story better. The upper-intermediate language learners use orientation clauses nearly twice more than what the pre-intermediate ones used. They did not limit themselves to just one aspect of orientation and utilized various types of information. Time, place, setting, and behavior, which are the four main aspects of orientation, were explained in details in the upper-intermediate learners' stories. Additionally, the upper-intermediate narrator went into details as he mentioned the departure, destination, and his distance from the city whereas the pre-intermediate narrator used general names in describing the orientation elements as he talked about street and home. He did not mention the name of the street or his friend the hospital (lines 1 & 2, Narrative 3). Though the lengths of narratives were almost the same, the upper-intermediate narrator used more clauses for expressing the orientation. Accordingly, the upper-intermediate learners used orientation aspects almost twice more than the other learners. This revealed that he tried to provide the basic perquisites prior to recounting the main action. He only described one main action in his story (line 18). But, the audience might have taken that there were more than one main action in the pre-intermediate narrative. In lines 7, 10, and 13 of Narrative 4, the narrator talked about the events which were prone to be the main action. In line 7, the

audience might have had the notion that the main action was an accident. Line 10 was the main action of the story, but it was not supported enough in the orientation as he jumped into another event without setting the floor.

**Main action**

The main action, the part that includes the most reportable or tellable event of the story, is the cornerstone of narratives content. Narrators generally express some events chronologically to prepare the audience for recounting the main action. In order to save space, here, we used Narrative 3 and 4 to explain the difference between language learners' narration regarding their language proficiency levels. In Narrative 3, which was narrated by a pre-intermediate language learner, the narrator articulated the most reportable event of the story in line 10 where he mentioned *and (…) injured my leg and broke broken my and my friend broken head his hands.* Before going to this event, he reported another coincident which was in line 7 that he stated *And short time one bicycle came came in to the street.* This event might be regarded as the most reportable event by mistake. This is also the case for line 13 where the storyteller said *and he fight with with bus driver.* These accounts of events might have been assumed as the main events of the story at first glance, but the continuation of the story after each event violates the assumptions. Although the orientation paves the way for narrating the main event, it was not satisfactory in this story. This problem was not observable in the upper-intermediate learner's narrative.

In Narrative 4, the narrator artfully formulated the ground prior to rehearsing the main event of the story which was *But this time, one of the car's wheel was moving in front of me,* (line 18). Before stating the main event, the narrator brought up a stream of events so that he paved the way appropriately for recapitulating the main action. He also took advantages of the orientation to make sense in his story. He described the condition of the car where he stated *It was too old* (line 5) and somehow in lines 3 and 4. Beforehand, he explained the way he was driving in line 2 where he mentioned *I didn't drive very fast*. Lines 7 to 13 were contained the events which were told chronologically one by

one in right order to direct the recipients' attention to the main action. In line 17, he repeated the same event and went to the most reportable event in line 18.

**Resolution**

As it can be observed at the end of Narrative 3, which was expressed by a pre-intermediate language learner, the result section of the story was not told clearly. There, the narrator asserted that he was not aware of what had happened to his friend in line 17. He mentioned that he just called his friend after two days and he was OK, but following the end of his main action, he just switched to another topic and the resolution of the story remained vague. On the other hand, in the story told by the upper-intermediate learner, it can be observed that after the most reportable event, he made the issue clear by explaining some other events. In lines 21 to 27, he chronologically recounted what happened after the event and what occurred finally. Making a comparison between these two narratives, it indicated that the upper-intermediate storyteller left no ambiguous or incomprehensible part in his story. In fact, the audience was directed toward the end of story step by step in a way that nothing remained puzzled. But, in Narrative 3, the narrator talked about some other events which were not related to the tellable part of the story which could be understood from the learners' questions in lines 18 and 19. These two lines showed that the narrator left his story unfinished which made other students confused about the end of the story.

**The coda**

The coda was absent in the stories told by both groups as well. The participants did not make any relationships between their stories and the present time. As the coda is the effect a story has on the narrator, by forming it, the narrator can signal that the narrative is finished. Thus, the coda is a bridge between the time of narration and the time the event has happened. Narratives 3 and 4 did not consist of coda parts.

## Discussion

The results of data analysis show that both pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners did not mention the abstract and coda

parts in their stories. The orientation in upper-intermediate language learner's stories was larger than orientation in pre-intermediate language learners' for the reason that the upper-intermediate language learners enjoy more knowledge in English to produce more words and structures while pre-intermediate language learners are not able to produce many words in English. Ellis (2009) mentioned that more proficient language learners are able to perform tasks more accurately and fluently. The upper-intermediate language learners can produce more complex discourse (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). However, Brown, Iwashita and McNamara (2005) and Inoue (2009) believe that language proficiency has no effect on quantity of language production. One point is that they mostly went to the main action and the most reportable event of the story without providing sufficient information for the audience while the upper-intermediate language learners could produce enough background information which sets the ground for recounting the main action and the most report events of the story. The other point is that the upper-intermediate language learners paid more attention to setting and behavior than pre-intermediate language learners. This point also refers to the narrators' knowledge in English. McClure, Mason and Williams (1983) mentioned that inclusion of the orientation and main action is a developmental trend which increases as language learners' knowledge in the target language grows. It confirms the findings of the present study indicating that proficiency levels might affect the way and quality of expressing orientation and main action in the narratives. Setting and behavior are among less used elements of the orientation in English narratives (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972). Pre-intermediate language learners centered upon the important parts of stories and ignored the points which they assumed as uninfluential in helping the audience understand them. The other reason might be the effect of L2 itself. Söter (1988) found that people with different L1 focused on different aspects of orientation. The results of data analysis indicated that Iranian EFL learners focused on time and place more than setting and behavior. Thus, more use of setting and behavior in upper-intermediate language learners' narratives in comparison to pre-intermediate language learners' indicates that L2 knowledge has

affected the EFL learners' narration as Labov and Waletzky (1967) mentioned that time and space were used more than other aspects of orientation in English narratives. Upper-intermediate language learners expressed specific words for time and places whereas pre-intermediate language learners mostly pointed to the place and time through stating general words and expressions. This result indicates that time and place are important for upper-intermediate learners. As Baynham (2003) and Herman (2001) maintained, time and place are the cornerstone of narratives. It means that upper-intermediate language leaners' knowledge of storytelling in English is larger than pre-intermediate ones.

The main action of the narratives was also different in upper-intermediate and pre-intermediate groups. The upper-intermediate language learners set the ground before going to the main actions. The chronological and logical relationship between different events of the story was more reasonable than the pre-intermediate learners' stories. The reason was because of higher degree of knowledge in the target language (English) that helped them use different types of words and structures. They could concentrate on both content and form of language when narrating stories whereas pre-intermediate language learners could not simultaneously produce acceptable form and comprehensible meaning. Many pre-intermediate learners asked for appropriate words during narration which broke the stream of telling. The most reportable event of a story which is a part of the main action, is easily identifiable in upper-intermediate learners' narratives while in some of other groups' narratives sounded to have more than one tellable event. The reason is that lower level language learners may change the topic (compensatory strategy) when they are not able to use words and correct form for the given topic (O'Malley Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Küpper, & Russo, 1985). This may make them jump from one event to another, which can result in misunderstanding of the events. According to deBoer (2014), as language learners become more proficient in learning a foreign language, they can produce more complex words that language. Consequently, more appropriate words

for expressing events are stated too. Word types, tokens, and type–token ratio are often used as indicators of lexical range, and word frequencies as indicators of lexical sophistication (Nation, 2001).

Jumping into the main action before preconstruction is another difference between two groups. Although the participants in both groups sometimes mentioned the main action first and then went to the events which preceded them, pre-intermediate language learners utilized this type of telling more than the other group. It was similar to the abstract of the story that summarizes the whole story. Pre-intermediate learners employed compensatory strategies more than the other group and presented general information about time and place. So co-construction occurred in their narratives more than in upper-intermediate one's. The type of questions which were asked by the teacher, classmates, and interviewer show that sufficient background information was not provided by the pre-intermediate learners due to lower knowledge in English, which led them to make sense rather than thinking about form and structure. They, absolutely, had enough information about their lived experiences, in better saying, they had as much information as upper-intermediate had about their past experiences, but they did not recount them as organized as upper-intermediate learners. The reason, logically, was lack of knowledge in English as their age, gender, and social factors were approximately the same.

Almost all upper-intermediate storytellers mentioned the resolution for the story events especially for the tellable one which was not true for the pre-intermediate narrators. They sometimes finished their stories in main action or evaluation. In fact, they did not explain what happened after the events and left some questions unanswered. They did not provide sufficient information before the main action, nor did they support that event after mentioning. Questions such as *what did you do finally or what happened at last* were common in pre-intermediate stories. There were many cases in which the listeners or interviewer asked the narrator to explain about the action that he or she had done after the event. The upper-intermediate language learners, on the other

hand, left no place for asking questions since they supported the events with the related and necessary information from the beginning to the end. This was also the case that was related to the language proficiency level. Language learners mostly centered upon exchanging meaning. More knowledgeable language learners go to more complicated structures and express more words when speaking because they have more knowledge of the target language. The comprehensive analysis of the collected narratives of both groups indicated that upper-intermediated language learners recounted the narratives which were approximately twice longer than those of pre-intermediate language learners. As it was previously mentioned, except for language proficiency, other personal and social factors were similar for the participants of both groups. Therefore, the difference in narratives structure could be the results of different language proficiency levels.

## Conclusion

This study examined the way pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners constructed oral lived narratives regarding their structures. However, evaluation which was the fourth part of narratives was not taken into account as it is categorized as narratives function. Other five sections of stories were studied based on Labov and Waletzkys' (1967) and Labov's (1972) analytical models. The results revealed that both groups of language learners did not state the abstract and coda parts in their narratives. The orientation was more organized in upper-intermediate learners' narratives than pre-intermediated ones as it paved the way for telling the story better. The main action focused on one reportable event in upper-intermediate learners' stories. The resolution part left no place for ambiguity in the upper-intermediate learners' narratives while there were some questions which were asked by the audience in the pre-intermediate narratives. These questions made known that the results were not rehearsed so well. In general, there was no specific place for different parts of stories as they happened everywhere a need was felt for mentioning them. The findings of the present study can shed light on our understanding of narratives and the way language proficiency levels might affect

language production. Additionally, it showed that narratives were a useful method of assessing language learners' knowledge in a foreign language especially in the contexts where exposure to native language users is low.

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## Appendix: Transcription System

| | |
|---|---|
| Line | Independent clause or utterance marked as separate by intonation |
| ((…)) | Incomprehensible |
| (.) | Short pause |
| (…) | Noticeable pause |
| ( ) | more explanations by the researcher |
| [ ] | Uncertain transcription |
| // | The beginning of an overlap where the other speaker(s) talks |
| ] | The end of an overlap where the other speaker(s) talks |

| | |
|---|---|
| → | Clause in focus |
| Line | Stressed elements |
| @ | Laughter (@@@ means long laughter) |
| Numbered line | Narrative clause |