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Employing Narrative Frames for Needs Analysis:
The Case of a Newly-Hired Teacher

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Abstract: As a newly-hired university teacher and a newcomer to a local community, I was keen to find out the needs and wants of my students. I therefore employed a qualitative data collection method known as narrative frames for needs analysis. The narrative frames method stimulates written expression of ideas with prompts, and in this study 20 university students taking a Media English course completed them in English at the beginning of a semester. It was revealed that the frames allowed me to be cognizant of (a) the students' expectations about the course, (b) the students' wants from me (the teacher), and (c) the students' intentions during the course. Finally, implications for the future use of narrative frames are presented.

Introduction

It is essential for language teachers to have a clear understanding about students' perceptions, opinions and insights about their classes (Barkhuizen, 1998; Best, Jones-Katz, Smolarek, Stolzenburg, & Williamson, 2015). This is perhaps even truer when a teacher is new to a school (as well as to the community where the school is located) since it is unlikely that the teacher and students share similar educational backgrounds, cultural common sense, or expectations about language teaching and learning. In an attempt to understand the needs and wants of students, I, a newly-hired teacher to a school and newcomer to a local community, employed a qualitative data collection method known as narrative frames, which stimulates written expression of ideas with prompts. Data were collected from 20 university students in a Media English course at the beginning of a semester through narrative frames in English. The frames helped me to come to know (a) the students' expectations about the course, (b) the students' wants from me, and (c) the students' intentions during the course. I conclude this paper with implications for future narrative frame users and researchers.

Narrative Frames

People from every walk of life have their own stories. Narratives unavoidably influence people,

social institutions, and cultures as 'sense-making tools' (Freeman, 2006). There has recently been a trend using narratives as a data collection method in the field of TESOL (Barkhuizen, 2011a). In particular, one type of qualitative data collection method known as narrative frames has gained popularity. This is "a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths" and is "structured as a story in skeletal form" (Barkhuizen, 2011b, p. 402). The method aims to allow participants to generate a coherent story by filling in the blank spaces based on their thoughts and experiences. For instance, teachers can express their teaching experience in their frames with the following starter: "I am an English teacher. The best thing about my teacher training was that…" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 377). Some advantages of the frames as a data collection method include that (a) they enable participants to write in a story form by scaffolding them through the specially-designed narrative structure and that (b) they let researchers obtain the appropriate amount and content of information they want (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). On the other hand, disadvantages involve (a) the frames possibly limiting participants' responses due to predetermined space and topics and (b) prompts possibly being read by participants in a way not intended by researchers (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008).

There are several studies currently available which utilized narrative frames for inquiring into the experiences of language teachers and learners (see Barkhuizen, 2014 for a summary of narrative frame

research to date). Among them, three studies (Barkhuizen, 2009; Macalister, 2012; Swenson & Visgatis, 2011) are particularly informative because they are similar to this study in terms of: the participants, that is, Japanese university students (Swenson & Visgatis, 2011); the purpose of narrative frame use, that is, using narrative frames for needs analysis (Macalister, 2012); and the methods of analysis, that is, using both a thematic analysis of the responses and a quantitative frequency calculation (Barkhuizen, 2009).

Barkhuizen (2009) used narrative frames to collect data from 83 university teachers in China. With seven sentence starters, the frames provided the participating teachers a coherent structure within which they could concentrate on conveying their experiences about, and reflections on, their own research projects. All the data were thematically coded and categorized, focusing on their commonalities. At the same time, the frequency of the themes appeared in the frames was counted. As a result of the two-stage analysis, three main categories were identified. They were the classroom-based problems, the focus, aim and types of related research projects, and potential research constraints. In the study, therefore, the teachers' perceptions and practices with regard to research became apparent through narrative frames. In Japan, Swenson and Visgatis (2011) sought to gain, with narrative frames, a fuller picture of the events that shaped overseas study experiences of four university students. The frames unveiled the students' multiple reasons for participating in the study abroad project, successes and problems the students experienced relating to the project, and suggestions for future study abroad projects. Based on the findings, the researchers discussed that the narrative frames functioned successfully as an evaluative tool to obtain more in-depth information than surveys about the students' feelings and thoughts regarding the study abroad project. Macalister (2012) collected stories from a large group of young seamen in Kiribati and reported on the use of narrative frames for needs analysis in the design of an English language curriculum. He argues that the method allowed the participants to write about their experiences in a way that traditional instruments such as questionnaires would not. He added that the frames enabled him to effectively gain insights about the participants' desires as English language learners.

Narrative frames thus provided participants a window of opportunity to reflect on their life events, express thoughts, reiterate their experiences, and imagine their future practices. In this study I employed narrative frames in one of my university courses (Media English) at the beginning a semester in order to determine students' needs and wants. I subsequently analyzed the data, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Methodology

A total of 20 third- and fourth-year university students who were taking a Media English course participated in this study. The course was an elective course for English major students. The decision to use narrative frames for this study was particularly appropriate due mainly to the following two reasons. One is that the frames provided the students, who are second language learners of English and might be unfamiliar with this type of writing, with guidance and support concerning both structure and content for their writing (Barkhuizen, 2009). Also the frames are said to enable participants to produce more detailed information about their perceptions than other methods such as surveys and questionnaires (Macalister, 2012; Swenson & Visgatis, 2011). The students completed narrative frames in English (see Appendix) within 30 minutes at the beginning of the first class of the course. I emphasized that what they write would not affect their grades in any way and that they could freely write their personal opinions and experiences. The frames were designed to enable the students to write about, for example, their needs and wants regarding the course as well as possible differences between the course and other courses (see Appendix). In total, 20 completed English narrative frames were collected. In analyzing the collected frames, I read them as a full story, as with the example below (the frame is in italics).

Example 1

I would like to take this course because ①I want to improve media-related English skill as well as know many different kinds of news. *I expect this course to be* ②hard. *And I imagine that I can learn* ③how to read news critically. *What I am most excited about is* ④I can learn many things through this course. *What I am*

most worried about is ⑤if I could get good grade. *In this class I want my teacher to* ⑥ give us opportunity of getting information of different fields, *(examples / details)* ⑦ politics, economics, science, food, entertainment, and so on. *I want my classmates to* ⑧ share their ideas with me, *(examples / details)* ⑨pair talk, group talk, and so on. *And I want to learn* ⑩media English through different kinds of ways, *(examples / details)* ⑪reading, listening, watching news. *Compared to other courses, I think this course is* ⑫have fewer students and silent and easy to concentrate on study. *Compared to classmates in other classes, I think the classmates in this course are* ⑬have high English ability and serious. *Compared to other teachers, I think the teacher in this course is* ⑭younger than I think. *Finally, I would like to say that* ⑮nice to meet you.

I also read them as thematically via the different spaces, for example, all written responses for the first space ①, in order to find commonalities among students for each space. In other words, I analyzed all the data (i.e., each narrative frame as a full story as well as responses for each space from all the participants) through content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), an inductive method which allows researchers to synthesize data, create codes and categories, and search for patterns amongst these. As a result of this iterative analytic procedure, three main categories emerged. They are: (a) students' expectations about the course, (b) students' wants from the teacher, and (c) students' intentions for the course.

Students' Expectations, Wants and Intentions

One of the main categories of findings concerns the students' expectations about the course. Table 1 shows that a number of the students had expectations about the course being either difficult (7 references) or easy (4 references) (11 references in total). Most of the students simply wrote in space ② "difficult" or "easy". It is surprising that even before the students started the course or met the teacher they already held impressions about the difficulty level of the course. The possible reasons for this are: (a) they had previously taken 'difficult' or 'easy' courses at the university and (b) they were worried about getting good grades or passing the course so much so that they thought the course to be 'diffi-cult'. As their teacher, I could not help but wonder what 'difficult' meant to the particular students. What did they expect to be difficult? Would it be the textbook chosen, English to be used in class, and/or topics to be studied? Although the answer was not entirely transparent, I knew that the anxiety the students had toward the course being difficult needed to be properly dealt with, as it might negatively affect their performance in the classroom and motivation for learning English in general. Given that the title of the course is 'Media English', it was hardly surprising that other students' expectations about the course were primarily related to the news in the media and their improvement of English skills. Some students expected that the course would provide different kinds of news from around the world (especially from the U.S.) (5 references), and others considered that the course would offer various means to improve their English skills, enhance listening abilities, or acquire new vocabulary items (4 references). It therefore became apparent in this study that the course was expected to play dual roles for the students' learning: introducing a myriad of news from abroad, in particular from the U.S., and improving the students' English proficiency. This led to

Table 1. *Students' Expectations about the Course*

Theme	Details of Theme	Frequency ($N = 20$)
Difficulty	Difficult, easy	11
News-related		
	Learn news from around the world	5
	Know news from the U.S.	
English-related		
	Improve English skills	4
	Enhance listening abilities	
	Acquire new vocabulary items	

reconfirming for myself that the purpose and goal of this course should be aimed at enabling the students to get access to diverse news and develop their English skills.

The second category relates to the students' wants from the teacher (see Table 2). Within this category, the most frequently mentioned theme was regarding the teacher's 'personality' (6 references). That is, the students wanted the teacher to be kind, approachable, and funny. For example, one student said: "I want my teacher to be friendly and kind to me" and added that she wanted the teacher to have some chats with her not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom. This was an intriguing finding in that many students in this study might have considered the teacher's personality and interpersonal traits to be more important than other matters such as the teacher's professional teaching skills or the course content. The second most frequently cited theme was related to pedagogical suggestions (5 references). Among those who offered suggestions about teaching, some wanted the teacher to give them an opportunity to provide ideas in class, and others put forth their wish to receive detailed explanation about news – sometimes in Japanese. As with the students' expectations about the course discussed earlier, several students (7 references in total) also wished the teacher, as an instructor of Media English, to provide a variety of news in different fields as well as to teach different aspects of the English language. Lastly, two stu-

dents expected a high level of professionalism from the teacher. Put differently, they wanted me to teach the course with responsibility. Whether the students pointed to this matter because they had previously had teachers who were responsible (or not!) for their teaching or because they respected teachers as experts and expected certain behaviors from their teachers is not clear. Nonetheless, the comments certainly made me seriously think about what it means to be a university teacher in Japan.

The final category is connected to the students' intentions for the course (see Table 3). Although the students expected to learn from the course more about news around the world than English itself (see Table 1), interestingly what the majority of the students (13 references) intended to do during the course was to develop their English abilities, rather than become acquainted with current news (6 references). Some illustrative examples from the students with regard to the English-related theme were: "I want to learn different English skills"; "I want to learn many vocabularies that I don't know yet"; and "I want to learn native use of English and express it". The reasons for this theme to be salient in this category can vary; however, one possibility is that they as English majors constantly feel the need to brush up and improve their English skills. Another is that, for a number of students, the media (e.g., articles, newspapers, and TV programs) might just be a tool for the ultimate purpose of their learning English. In other words, they might not enjoy the content of news or deepen their thoughts about it but rather they regard news as just one of the mediums from which to learn English. The second-most quoted key theme was news-related intentions, and some showed interest in reading and watching news inside and outside the classroom so as to be abreast of issues in the media. What is worthy of mentioning here, however, is that those who showed their intention for learning about news were mainly interested in 'local' (Japan and Okinawa) news, as opposed to news around the world (or from the U.S.) that the students ex-

Table 2. *Students' Wants from the Teacher*

Theme	Details of Theme	Frequency ($N = 20$)
Personality		
	Be kind	
	Be approachable	6
	Be funny	
Pedagogical Suggestions		
	Give students chance to provide ideas	
	Give careful explanations (sometimes in Japanese)	5
News-related		
	Provide various news in different fields	4
English-related		
	Teach different aspects of English	3
Professionalism		
	Teach English with responsibility	2

pected to learn from the course (see Table 1). One student stated: "I need to watch Japanese news everyday". Another remarked: "this class is more useful because we learn local Okinawa news in our daily life". Lastly, there was one student who was unclear about the intention for the course.

Concluding Remarks

I have reported in this paper on narrative frames used for needs analysis in a university Media English class. The collected English narrative frames from 20 Japanese students were analyzed using both a thematic analysis and a quantitative frequency calculation (see also Barkhuizen, 2009). Emerged themes were: (a) the students' expectations about the course, (b) the students' wants from me (the teacher), and (c) the students' intentions during the course. Although I did not have any information about the students (besides their names and major) at the onset of the course, the frames enabled me to acknowledge the expectations the students held regarding the course, for example, they would have hard time during the course; they would learn news from around the world through the course; and they could improve their English skills in the course. The frames also helped me to identify what the students wanted me to do during the course, for example, they hoped that I would be kind and friendly to them; they wanted me to give them time to present their opinions in class; and they wished that I would deal with different news in multiple fields and teach various aspects of English. Lastly, I learned, through the narrative frames, that the students intended in the course to develop English skills as well as to be familiar with (local) news.

The narrative frames in this study aided me in better understanding the students' needs and wants (see also Macalister, 2012; Swenson & Visgatis, 2011), and I could subsequently reconsider and revise the plan and content of the course. This has probably equipped me to be able to create lessons that are tailored to the particular students' interests and beliefs. For example, I decided to incorporate several Japanese—in particular, Okinawan—news articles into our classes, in addition to those from the textbook (Knight, 2013). In this regard, I suggest that teachers, particularly those who are new to a school, employ narrative frames for needs analysis in order to accommodate their students' perspectives and make good judgment about planning and executing their classes.

It is of significance that, as a researcher, I address the boundaries and limitations of this current study. Firstly, since the participants involved consisted of only 20 students from one course (Media English) at a university, generalizing the results of my study for others (or for me in other courses) might be difficult, if not impossible. The findings in this study therefore must be interpreted and used with care. Secondly, as I was both the researcher and the teacher, the participating students might have felt the need to write what they thought I wanted them to write even though I instructed them to write freely on completing the frames. In discussing the use of narrative frames, Hiratsuka (2014) argued that a third person from outside the classroom can "play the important role of a go-between for students and teachers … and select only professionally related comments, as opposed to personal ones" (p. 176). It might therefore be worthwhile to conduct similar studies with a third person, and compare and contrast the results with those of this study.

My recommendations for future studies using narrative frames pertain particularly to combining other data collection methods, using the frames over time, and using Japanese narrative frames. First, other data collection methods, such as individual interviews and focus group discussion, could be combined with narrative frames in order to delve more into the opinions and experiences of students. For example, in this study I could have interviewed those who expected a high level of professionalism from the teacher in order to find out why they came to hold such expectations and further asked how the teacher could achieve it. Second, for a more fruitful use of narrative frames, I (or future teachers and researchers) can collect students thoughts and ideas via similar or different narrative frames at several points during the semester to see to what extent and in what way their perspectives change (or remain static). In doing so, I can be conscious of the students' updated feelings toward the course throughout the semester, and flexibly shift the focus and direction of the subsequent classes, if deemed necessary. The benefits of the repeated use of the frames are not limited to the teacher. From the points of the students, too, they can record and track their perceptions, and reflect on their ideas during the semester. Finally, it was found in Hiratsuka's (2014) study that "narratives in both the mother tongue and target

Table 3. *Students' Intentions for the Course*

Theme	Details of Theme	Frequency ($N = 20$)
English-related		
	Improve media-related English	13
	Learn how to speak and/or write English	
Pedagogical Suggestions		
	Read and watch (local) news inside and outside the classroom	6
Unclear		1

language of the participants can complement each other" and that in his study "the Japanese frames … enabled the students to provide their perspectives without making them anxious about their English language abilities" (p. 176). Although the students in this study were English major university students and had a relatively good command of English, the use of Japanese narrative frames might have yielded different and illuminating findings.

I hope this paper will facilitate more discussion about, and generate a number of possibilities for, the narrative frame method among teachers and researchers. This and other research methods should always be scrutinized and used for our ultimate purpose – making language learning and teaching better.

This paper focused on one individual's experience regarding English. The findings should not be generalized from this single case study. Still, the information may be useful for language learners, language teachers, or researchers. The elements in this paper should be used carefully.

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Appendix

Narrative Frames
(responses for each space were written on a separate paper)

I would like to take this course because ①

I expect this course to be ②

I imagine that I can learn ③

What I am most excited about is ④

What I am most worried about is ⑤

In this class I want my teacher to ⑥ *(examples / details)* ⑦

I want my classmates to ⑧ *(examples / details)* ⑨

And I want to learn ⑩ *(examples / details)* ⑪

Compared to other courses, I think this course is ⑫

Compared to classmates in other classes, I think the classmates in this course are ⑬

Compared to other teachers, I think the teacher in this course is ⑭

Finally, I would like to say that ⑮