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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Features of Teaching Humanities Disciplines in the University

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes several vectors for rethinking the teaching of humanities disciplines in higher education in a way that takes into account the holistic development of the learner, including the need for self-identification, cognitive growth, and greater autonomy in the educational process. These reflections are grounded in many years of research conducted primarily in Russia and France on the role of narrative and storytelling in education. The first part of the paper examines key concepts related to identity formation in learning, the role of culture in the development of communication, and the place of narratology in the educational process. The second part presents empirical and practice-oriented studies that address the therapeutic value of narrative storytelling in identity formation, the advantages of storytelling methodology as a pedagogical tool in humanities education, and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in fostering learners' written and oral communication skills. The article argues that narrative-based approaches can enhance students' engagement, improve the assimilation of complex humanities concepts, and support the development of reflective, culturally aware, and communicatively competent learners. Prospects for further research are outlined, particularly in identifying correlations between narrative thinking, identity development, and the teaching of humanities disciplines in contemporary university settings.

INTRODUCTION

Humanities narratives play a crucial role in teaching humanities disciplines, as they transform learning into an engaging and contextualized experience that goes beyond rote memorization. The application of storytelling skills development methodology (hereinafter referred to as storytelling, ST) helps embed theoretical concepts, historical and cultural meanings, and interpretive frameworks in meaningful contexts, fosters empathy and critical reflection, and supports learners in developing their intellectual and cultural identity, thereby promoting deeper understanding, authentic engagement, and more meaningful connections with the subject matter.

Linguistic narrative stories (hereinafter referred to as Narrative Stories, NS), as exemplary models of discourse construction, provide vivid scenarios (syntax, vocabulary, pronunciation) that make learning less abstract and more memorable. They enable focused work on specific aspects of grammar and narrative syntax, including, in particular, personal pronouns, modal verbs, figures of speech, and logical connectors, thus strengthening language proficiency. By modeling interpersonal interactions, NS prepare learners for real-life communication, which is essential for a smooth and conflict-free transition from the native language to a foreign one, thereby contributing to the development of learners' overall communicative competence.

Cultural narratives ensure deeper contextual understanding and more effective assimilation of the presented linguistic material. Culture contributes not only to the formation of linguistic skills and

abilities but also to the acquisition of interactional models realized through non-verbal aspects of communication, such as facial expressions, gestures, and body posture. Ultimately, it shapes elements of allophonic ways of thinking, making the study of culture indispensable for adequate mastery of a foreign language (Adam, 2019).

Immersion in a cultural narrative allows the learner to "become," even if only momentarily, a native speaker, facilitating the acceptance of a new attitude toward an alternative identity (Benveniste, 2012). The exploration of cultural practices and artifacts through NS develops the ability to understand other perspectives—in other words, it fosters empathy and enhances the prospects of future interpersonal and intercultural interactions.

We argue that Storytelling (ST) should be unequivocally integrated into foreign language teaching. For this purpose, a wide range of texts in the form of adapted narrative stories may be used—from literary works to personal stories—provided that they are based on clear argumentative structures and employ a rich vocabulary. Storytelling should become an effective tool for teachers, enabling them to create an engaging learning process by combining traditional exercises with enriching experiential elements. Narrative stories are not merely supplementary materials; they function as catalysts that connect language, culture, and identity, rendering learning both meaningful and effective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Before presenting the author's conceptual framework and the epistemological positions of this study, it is necessary to take a brief excursion into the background of our terminological and methodological explorations. At the outset of our teaching careers in Soviet secondary schools and lyceums in the city of Belgorod and the surrounding region (under the guidance of experienced mentors), we applied techniques aimed at developing narrative thinking in English and French language classes. Long before the now-fashionable term storytelling came into use (Nazaykin, 2025), while still senior students at a pedagogical institute, we were already engaged in terminological exercises, searching for a name for an "invented" methodology of emotionally conveying rational information in the form of a story, tale, fairy tale, fable, or legend—or, in contemporary terms, a narrative. To this end, hybrid neologisms were coined, such as chudopis', divoskaz, chudoskaz, narrobassnya, khitroskaz, and others.

The first experiments were conducted in English as a foreign language groups in lower secondary school (grades 4–5). For us, as young specialists, the main objective was to create effective ways of presenting, practicing, and consolidating curricular empirical material through the use of chudoskaz. As a result, narrative story models were developed within which lexical material on the topic "Fruits and Vegetables" was practiced. In these stories, representatives of the plant world behaved like "living" characters: apples "visited" pears, while cucumbers and tomatoes "strolled arm in arm" in an imaginary garden or vegetable patch.

Later, the experiment was continued in lyceum-level French language groups at a specialized school, where second- and third-grade pupils actively participated in creating divoskaz stories about the lives of letters of the French alphabet, becoming characters in imaginary narratives and transforming into "symbolic" French boys and girls.

Several years later, Professor A. P. Sedykh conducted narratological workshops and research in educational institutions, developing operational models of narrative stories for the assimilation and contrastive acquisition of Russian phraseological units by lyceum students in Madagascar and by students at French universities (Sedykh, Glivich, 2011).

Concluding this brief historical and methodological overview, it should be emphasized that contemporary narratology in language teaching, grounded in the narrative theories of Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (Genette, 1998; Todorov, 1980), provides not only tools for the structural analysis of texts at the level of cognitive-communicative reconstruction of characters, semantic focusing of utterances, and accentuation of narrative time. By integrating the outcomes of the "narrative turn" (tournant narratif), which encompassed cinema, the video industry, and the media environment at the end of the twentieth century, narratology primarily established the crucial role of the reader and of emotions, laying the foundations for more concrete forms of learning associated with pleasure and with the development of understanding and analysis of stories. This

holds true even though the application of narrative thinking in educational contexts may at times remain challenging and require a rethinking of the correlations between reading technique ("how") and the perception of what is read ("why" we read).

Thus, we begin with a principle to which we have adhered throughout our teaching lives: learning a foreign language presupposes the (re)construction of the self, and culture plays a central role in this process. A foreign language cannot be mastered merely by acquiring previously unknown vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics, especially in adulthood, because an individual with an already established identity and social background must overcome personal boundaries and "enter" the symbolic universe of another culture in order to construct a personal narrative of a new identity. It should be added that "language is not neutral and not only carries traces of the history and cultural context of a society, but also to a large extent shapes the linguosemiotic formats of autochthonous culture" (Sedykh, 2025, p. 20).

At the core of this idea lies a fundamental assumption that language is not merely an object of learning, but also a means of learning, and at the same time a means through which the learner represents the learning process itself. From this perspective, individuals constantly interact with the external world by using artifacts, concepts, and cultural acts that allow them to control not only the world around them, but also their own cognitive and social activity, with language serving as the primary instrument of this cultural interaction. In this light, learning a foreign language requires a profound cognitive-communicative transformation on the part of the learner and a transition into a new symbolic world.

In our reflections, we align ourselves with the concept of traditional pedagogical constructivism developed by the Swiss scholar Jean Piaget and the Soviet psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky (Piaget, 2004; Vygotsky, 2007). In general terms, pedagogical constructivism is a theory of learning that holds that learners actively construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world on the basis of personal experience, reflection, and interaction, rather than passively absorbing information. The teacher thus becomes a mediator who creates problem-solving situations in order to stimulate this internal construction, integrating new knowledge into the learner's existing mental structures so that it can be meaningfully processed. As Piaget (1937) famously stated, "Intelligence organizes the world by organizing itself" (p. 311). In other words, the cognitive process is based on adaptation and is oriented toward organizing the material world rather than discovering ontological reality. Knowledge, therefore, is not passively acquired but actively constructed by the thinking subject.

This holistic perspective compels us to reconsider our view of the young learner. Instead of perceiving the learner solely in terms of the distance separating him or her from the linguistic competence of a native speaker, and measuring progress only in terms of acquired vocabulary or mastered grammatical rules, we should regard the learner as a multidimensional social being, capable of communicating with peers and of assuming at least partial responsibility for his or her own learning. The central question, however, remains how to achieve this goal, even if educators worldwide agree on its importance.

Since the 1970s, a significant conceptual shift in the understanding of knowledge has taken place, commonly referred to as the "narrative turn." Whether in philosophy, literary theory, anthropology, history, cognitive science, or education, the role of narrative in its broadest sense has been recognized and valued, particularly as a privileged means of representing knowledge and transmitting it to others. The focus has shifted from the study of narrative structures in literature to a more comprehensive examination of narrative as a means of structuring cognitive and social knowledge (Propp, 2001).

The core idea of this approach is that the study of narrative makes it possible to understand how people appropriate the external world: it is through narrative that individuals come to know, understand, and make sense of the world, and subsequently construct their social identity (Chapman, 1988). This involves not merely an interest in the narrative forms of human communication—children's stories, fairy tales, travel accounts, and the like—but also a rethinking of epistemology itself, granting narrative forms a legitimacy they often lacked in the past. What was described in the humanities as the "end of positivism" opened the way to an approach that assigns greater importance to interaction in the construction of knowledge (Chapman, 1988).

By the late 1980s, the focus of the social sciences had shifted toward the concept of interpretation—that is, toward the interpretation of meaning, the identification of codes governing text comprehension, and an understanding of society as a "text" that people "read" in search of meaning. Within this framework, so-called narrative thinking is contrasted with logical and mathematical thinking, becoming one of the central cognitive modes of human consciousness (Turusheva, 2016).

In a broad sense, there are two ways in which human beings can organize and manage their knowledge of the world and even structure their immediate experience. The first appears to be more specialized in grasping "material objects," while the second is more suited to understanding humanity and its complexities. The former is commonly referred to as logical-scientific thinking, the latter as narrative thinking. Logical-scientific thinking seeks the conditions of truth for a concept. Since Ancient Greece, reality has often been regarded as reducible to a set of logical propositions. Cartesian rationalism privileges this mode of thinking, considering it superior to other ways of knowing the world. This view has profoundly shaped our understanding of knowledge—and, consequently, of education—over the centuries.

The growing interest in narrative thinking, including within the scientific community itself, stems from the recognition of the importance of studying not so much the object in isolation, outside any spatio-temporal determinism, as the mediated relationships between the object and its context. The aim here is not to replace the dominance of the scientific approach with a narrative one, but rather to understand the complementarity of the two approaches and, above all, to explore the most effective ways of using them in education. From a pedagogical perspective, this idea leads us to consider how the subject will understand the object—that is, how it will be integrated into an already existing conceptual system.

It is worth noting that the first experiments involving the use of narrative stories were conducted in mathematics-focused schools. Mathematics is a striking example of a subject whose content is perceived as "objective, universal, reliable, and verifiable." In the public consciousness, there is little doubt that mathematics represents a set of "objects," facts, and knowledge, the rules and procedures of which must be memorized (Burton, 1996).

Many scholars believe that learning mathematics through narratives involves using stories to concretize abstract concepts, establish connections with everyday life, stimulate creativity, and explore concepts (such as counting or multiplication) through characters and adventures. This approach often combines bodily movement with storytelling in order to engage different levels of intelligence, thereby making learning more engaging and accessible.

Such experiments have not yet produced spectacular results, but this has not prevented mathematics educators from continuing their search in this area. We argue that methodologies aimed at developing narrative thinking nevertheless hold significant promise for application in the teaching of the exact sciences. The advantages of this approach in mathematics include the following:

1. Mathematics becomes a less "alienating" and more engaging subject.
2. Narrative thinking fosters the development of creativity and imagination in problem-solving within the exact sciences.
3. The use of narrative stories optimizes the acquisition of mathematical terminology.
4. The process of narrativization promotes the evolution of interdisciplinary approaches by linking mathematics with verbal activity and the language of bodily movement.

Each student who listens to a personalized story from the "life" of numerals or algebraic equations not only grasps the originality of a particular method for solving mathematical problems, but also becomes engaged with the story of its discovery and acquires the desire to achieve the same independently. At the same time, the role of narratives is not limited to entertaining presentations of methods and rules. An increasing number of educators believe that storytelling (ST), and written discourse in general, can help learners assimilate the general concepts underlying the problems they study, better understand the course of their own reasoning, and thus, to some extent, assume responsibility for their own learning.

Authors of narrative-based methodologies develop specific instructional strategies that help learners overcome difficulties in comprehension, particularly with regard to terminological repertoires—for example, by making proofs more transparent, demonstrating conceptual links

between two mathematical notions, explaining their mathematical representations, increasing interest in the history and development of mathematics, and more effectively integrating mathematics into the overall school curriculum.

Storytelling, as a cognitive procedure, can contribute not only to the understanding of mathematics but can also become a crucial pedagogical tool, for example, in the study of the native language. Research in this field is more or less directly grounded in methodological studies on the development of children's thinking.

Numerous studies demonstrate that storytelling is a skill that develops steadily in children regardless of their cultural background. For instance, analyses of the ability to organize and retrieve information through storytelling across different cultures have revealed a high degree of consistency: "The structure of stories may correspond to a universal structure across cultures… possibly a universal mnemonic device," the researchers argue (Mandler et al., 1980, p. 21).

It should be noted that scholars have observed that children's ability to tell personal stories between the ages of 4 and 10 evolves from fragmented narration and relative poverty of representational means (ages 4–5) to a gradual increase in coherence against the background of predominantly linear narration. By the age of 10, a child appears to acquire the ability to tell stories in a manner similar to that of an adult (Mandler et al., 1980).

These studies, like many others in this field, trace their origins to the seminal article by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967), "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience," devoted to spontaneous oral narratives of personal experience produced by African American children in Philadelphia. This article demonstrated that spontaneous narration, beyond what is traditionally labeled as "literature," can constitute an independent object of scholarly inquiry. The authors showed that all of these children's stories were organized according to a six-part structure, presented as answers to implicit questions:

1. Abstract: What is the story about?
2. Orientation: Who, when, where, what?
3. Complicating action: What happens next?
4. Evaluation: Why is this important to us?
5. Resolution or conclusion: How did it all end?
6. Coda: At the end of the story, the narrator returns to the present situation (Labov, Waletzky, 1967).

This instinctive ability is of fundamental importance for a child's cognitive and social development and represents the primary means of understanding the surrounding world. In our view, narration is one of the principal ways of making sense of experience. It is not merely a verbal representation of experience; it is a mechanism for mediating reality in the very process of meaning-making. The process of narrativization is inseparable from the formation of identity. From this perspective, narration can be regarded not only as a basic means of integrating knowledge and comprehending the world, but also as a way of understanding who we are and of self-improvement throughout life.

When language learners speak, they do not simply exchange information; they also participate in a continuous process of organizing and reorganizing their identity and their relationship with society. In short, they are engaged in processes of identity formation and the creation of models of social interaction.

If we now apply everything that has just been said about learning in general to the study of a foreign language, we will see that the same issues arise with regard to the acquisition, implementation, and projection of knowledge, skills, communication, and identity—but in a more acute form.

Knowledge encompasses an extremely complex set of interdependent phenomena: syntax, vocabulary, intonation, pronunciation, and so forth. This knowledge is necessarily connected with the learner's existing knowledge of the native language. This interrelationship is itself highly complex and only partially understood by linguists. The acquisition of skills requires considerable effort and prolonged, regular practice. Communication is possible only through interaction with other speakers of the language, which must somehow be simulated if the learner is not immersed in the target-language environment.

Finally, while mathematics or history can be studied while remaining a typical native speaker of one's mother tongue, learning Russian or French requires the adoption of a temporary status as a speaker of Russian or French. In adolescence, such a shift in identity constitutes a challenging task and may directly affect the formation of one's own identity and the determination of one's place in society.

In the next part of the paper, we will discuss a number of issues concerning the role of narratives in the construction of identity, examine elements of assessing learners' knowledge and skills on the basis of narrated stories, and address the instrumental aspect of narratives in teaching both foreign and native languages.

From this perspective, the ideas of several researchers on the phenomenon of bilingualism appear particularly interesting and productive for further work with narratives. Thus, Aneta Pavlenko and James Lantolf suggest that the process of self-transformation experienced by bilingual individuals includes the following phases of loss and recovery of identity:

"A period of identity loss, which can be divided into five phases:

1. Loss of linguistic identity;
2. Loss of subjectivity;
3. Loss of frame of reference and of the link between signified and signifier;
4. Loss of the 'inner voice';
5. Loss of the native language. A period of recovery and reconstruction, including four phases:
6. Appropriation of others' voices;
7. The emergence of a new voice, often beginning with writing;
8. Therapy through translation, reconstruction of one's past;
9. Development involving multiple new subjectivities" (Pavlenko, Lantolf, 2000, pp. 162-3).

From this point of view, many researchers in the field of foreign language learning emphasize the importance of self-narration in managing the transitions that occur within the learner: "we understand who we are through language, through an ongoing process of self-narration" (Crossley, 2000, p. 14). The learner of a foreign language, more than anyone else, needs to understand who he or she is. For a truly bilingual person, this process may last a lifetime. Neglecting this aspect of foreign language learning risks leading to serious difficulties, obstacles, or even abandonment of learning.

In his dissertation, the Japanese researcher Taniguchi (2009) examined the role of self-narration in the (re)construction of the self in two bilingual individuals. He sought to answer the following questions:

1. What can learners' stories teach us about the long-term process of language learning?
2. What role can autobiographical writing play in language learning?
3. To what extent can a narrative approach contribute to research in the fields of language and writing skills? (Taniguchi, 2009)

The narrative autobiographies of students that we examined show for the first time that bilingualism is a continuous process encompassing multiple interrelated facets and requiring constant movement between two languages, two cultures, and intensive efforts of restructuring. It is a dynamic process that never stabilizes.

It should be emphasized that bilingualism includes many dimensions that go beyond the purely linguistic: rethinking one's place in society, balancing between two cultures, two identities, two language systems, and mastering a new affective code. Of course, the linguistic dimension should not be neglected. It is necessary not only to master both languages, but also to learn, at times, to use one language, for example, for writing, and the other for speaking, or one for technical texts and the other for everyday communication.

At the same time, it must be remembered that learning is a bidirectional process: what is learned in a second language may later be applied to the first. This is neither a linear nor a unidirectional progression, nor a regular process that reaches a plateau and then stops.

Drawing on personal teaching experience and interaction with bilinguals, one may conclude that bilingual individuals are engaged in a continuous process of "translation." This is not only translation

in the classical sense from one language into another, but also a constant reinterpretation of meaning at all levels—cultural, identity-related, social, and others. Bilinguals learn not only to use two living languages, but also to engage in metalinguistic and metacultural work on themselves and on others.

Thus, being bilingual is difficult, sometimes even painful, and leads to constant self-reflection. Writing about one's experience can have therapeutic value, helping bilingual individuals understand what is happening to them and manage their emotions. The benefits of narrative writing extend far beyond mere language improvement. It is reasonable to assume that it may have a similar effect on monolingual learners as well.

A few remarks on the axiology of children's narrative creativity. To begin with, not everyone is born a gifted storyteller, but every child and adult is capable of telling a story. As noted earlier, children appear to acquire storytelling skills through a regular and predictable process. Moreover, the structure of narrative seems to constitute a universal cognitive structure.

Within the framework of a narratological experiment, we compared the stories told by ten Russian-speaking children with those of twenty French pupils for whom Russian was a foreign language. We examined how children in both groups organized events in their narratives and how they used what William Labov terms evaluation, that is, how they viewed the narrative from a perspective that justifies the existence of the story or a particular fragment of it ("Why are you telling us this?"). As noted earlier, the ability to use evaluation to prioritize events in a story serves as an indicator of a child's progress in mastering storytelling skills.

Of the ten narratives produced by Russian-speaking children, eight followed a classical narrative schema, one ended abruptly at the climax, and one did not constitute a complete narrative.

The French pupils' narratives included "fragmentary," disoriented, chronological (linear), and classical stories. It should be noted that psycholinguistic research shows that, from the perspective of cognitive development, narratives produced in a foreign language demonstrate an age-related delay of up to two years (Kuftyak et al., 2019).

As far as evaluation is concerned, all the narratives contained evaluative elements; however, only the Russian-speaking children appeared to use evaluation consciously to establish a hierarchy within their stories. Most of the French-speaking learners used evaluation merely as a means of local emphasis rather than as a tool for ensuring coherence and determining the place of an event within the broader narrative.

Thus, the first conclusion of this experiment is that a learner's "pragmatic" abilities depend on the level of his or her purely linguistic competence. This finding is noteworthy, given that pragmatic abilities are already acquired in the native language.

This study is of interest not only because it informs us about the narrative abilities of children learning a first and a second language, but also because it reminds us that storytelling is an acquired skill requiring linguistic knowledge as well as a certain degree of confidence and charisma. It was observed that young French learners were far more willing to speak during Russian language classes to answer a question, describe an object, or give instructions than to tell a story. Therefore, before employing storytelling as a teaching method, one should consider how it will be used in the classroom. In this respect, research into children's intuitive understanding of narrative structures opens the way to a highly promising pedagogical approach applicable not only to foreign languages, but also to the native language.

CONCLUSION

Narrative storytelling constitutes a powerful pedagogical tool that makes learning more engaging and memorable by using *chudoskaz* to convey concepts, foster empathy and involvement, and structure thinking. It enables learners to acquire knowledge through immersion, emotional engagement, and contextualization, whether in oral narration or multimedia formats. This mechanism of self-expression facilitates the understanding of complex concepts, improves information retention, and stimulates personal expression, transforming learning into a collaborative and meaningful adventure.

Engaging stories capture attention and arouse interest, encouraging active learner participation, which indicates increased engagement and additional motivation in language learning. Emotions and context generated by educational narratives contribute to the encoding of information in long-term memory. Storytelling simplifies abstract concepts by illustrating them through concrete examples and situations, helps structure thinking, develops empathy, explores multiple perspectives, and enhances communication. Mastery of meaning-making procedures lends linguosemiological significance to learning by linking it to lived experience or imagined adventures.

Several examples of the practical application of storytelling methodology may be highlighted:

1. Oral narration: learners listen to or read material and then retell it orally or in writing to consolidate learning.
2. Structured narration: the creation of scenarios (space missions, puzzles) with a narrative structure (introduction, conflict, resolution) to explore subject matter.
3. Contextualization: the use of real or fictional examples to illustrate theories.
4. Active learning: giving learners the opportunity to create their own stories or analyze existing ones.
5. Diverse media resources: employing oral, written, visual (video), or interactive forms of storytelling.

Areas of application for narrative stories include the development of comprehension and expressive abilities in both native and foreign languages, as well as immersion in complex situations to cultivate judgment and ethical skills. This applies to both the humanities and the exact sciences, as many disciplines can be transformed into engaging narratives. Experimental findings demonstrate that a narratological approach to foreign language teaching turns learning into an immersive and empathetic experience, making knowledge more accessible, relevant, and durable.

Prospects for future research revolve around further diversification and optimization of foreign language learning through the narratological methodology of self-narration. This project is linked to the notion of the innate creativity of human nature and the striving to attain one's authentic identity. As individuals learn a foreign language, they construct a secondary linguistic biography. With each newly acquired language, a different mode of existence emerges, evolving according to parallel laws dictated by the structures of the target language-culture.

The degree to which this acquired algorithm functions effectively depends on the level of proficiency and the modes of assimilation of the unfamiliar linguistic space. This new mode of existence is actualized in the form of a narrative story told or written in the foreign language, which gradually becomes (or may become) an idiom identifying a secondary linguistic personality—in other words, a linguosemiological double of the original identity. Ultimately, these perspectives are primarily aimed at developing learners' ability to understand people from similar or distant cultures and to interact with them constructively, thereby helping to dismantle stereotypes and foster openness and tolerance toward all linguistic and cultural communities.

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