PASAA
Volume 40
April 2007

Learner Narratives and the Writing Curriculum: A Study of the Strategic Rhetoric*

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Abstract

Replacing the traditional view of the curriculum as a statement of what should be done in a course of study, the learner-centered curriculum takes as its starting point what is done by language teachers in their classes. In an attempt to develop a negotiated model in which the curriculum is seen as a collaboration between teachers and students, this project aims at analysis of learner narratives focusing on their self-concept (metacognitive knowledge) as writers. The research aims to focus on the premise that as a cohesive group, learners do try to assert power that can potentially transform teaching-learning activities. In this sense, a fundamental objective of the project is to consider learner narratives as strategic rhetoric. The paper argues that analysis paves the way for a negotiated curriculum in writing skills that can more accurately gauge learner needs and can optimally deploy learning and communication strategies that the learners already possess.

Introduction and Research Context

This paper is written in response to a critical challenge related

* Expanded version of a paper presented at the *World Congress on the Power of Language* in Bangkok, 2006.

to the ESL writing curriculum. In a number of teaching contexts, students seem to be taking writing courses where they, more often than not, get demotivated due to re-teaching, irrelevance, and mistuning. Either they are taught the same portion of grammar they studied in previous ESL courses, or they are taught writing skills and strategies that may not bear relevance to the writing tasks they are interested in. This results in inadequate tuning since the course might be pitched at a substantially different and hence unsuitable level. Fields of diagnostic analysis, attitude studies, text, and needs analysis have addressed these concerns from various angles. Against the background of these studies, this paper proposes using narrative analysis as a valid and useful method to design writing curriculum.

Most writing and proficiency programs begin with a formal or informal needs analysis. Although the institutional curriculum comes handy to the instructor, the blueprint of action or curriculum in action (CIA) needs to be formulated on the basis of the particular group of students assigned to the instructor. It would be interesting and rewarding to see how the instructors formulate their CIA in such contexts. On the one hand, instructors would like to make their CIA planning exercise as meaningful as possible. Most instructors would like to capitalize on the fact that a better awareness of the learner needs at this stage would make their teaching more rewarding for themselves as well as for their learners. On the other hand, factors such as unfamiliarity with the students, time pressures, and lack of resources might at times make the CIA formulation exercise a brief, cursory, or even a ritualistic affair. This is likely to lead to a course that is not in tune with learner profiles.

At this juncture, I would like to use a metaphor from the medical profession to describe the point we are discussing here. While describing the haste with which doctors arrive at a diagnosis (similar to CIA in our case), Foucault (1973) complains about the change from more humane to technology-affected communication patterns. Foucault elaborates this shift by mentioning that more and more communication patterns used by doctors seem to focus on *Where does it hurt?* rather than more humane questions such as *Why does it hurt?* and *What happened?* Todd (1983) shares and supports Foucault's concern by stating that doctors typically want

to arrive at *diagnosis* as quickly as possible, while patients often want to introduce aspects of their biography. This metaphor should be of interest and relevance to us since teachers developing writing or general language proficiency typically deal with 'weaknesses' of student writers and wish to arrive at a diagnosis so that a 'prescription' can be given. In their attempt to make this process efficient, it might just be possible that instructors ignore vital aspects of their students' biography (*Why does it hurt? What happened?*) which might contain useful data to form the basis of CIA. Once we are convinced of the need to obtain and use information from learners' biographies for curriculum development, the questions that arise next are:

(1) What might be good ways of obtaining useful information from learners' biographies?

(2) Which parts of the biographies should be focused on?

There might be several options and approaches available to react to these two questions. Epistemological research does provide several directions to choose from, and the present paper is written with the intention of exemplifying one such approach. Since the aim here is to exemplify rather than to investigate, the project size is intentionally kept smaller. In this project, a combination of different methods is used to form a singular approach, although in other projects of similar nature, it might be possible to just use one of these methods. However, before we study the actual research methodology used in this project, let us understand the ways in which three crucial terms (representing three different methods of analysis) have been used in this paper.

Concepts and Terms

Metacognition* and *Metacognitive Knowledge: Since curricular planning in most educational areas is still based on taxonomy of objectives created by Bloom, it may be rewarding to relate our discussion to this taxonomy. The revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) contains four general knowledge categories: *Factual*, *Conceptual*, *Procedural*, and *Metacognitive*. While the first three categories were included in the original

taxonomy, the metacognitive category was added later. Broadly speaking, metacognitive knowledge involves knowledge about cognition in general and (more specifically) about one's own cognition. A number of models of metacognition have been conceptualized (e.g., Bransford et al., 1999; Brown et al., 1983; Flavell, 1979; Paris & Winograd, 1990; Pintrich et al., 2000; Schneider & Pressley, 1997). For the purpose of this project, an important distinction could be the one between (a) knowledge of cognition and (b) the processes through which the monitoring, control, and regulation of cognition take place. At the most basic level, metacognitive knowledge includes knowledge (or awareness) of strategies that can be used for different tasks. It also includes knowledge of the conditions under which these strategies might be used and knowledge of the extent to which the strategies are effective. Knowledge of self and self-concept form the third layer of metacognition (Flavell, 1979; Pintrich et al., 2000; Schneider & Pressley, 1997). The concept of metacognition is useful for any curricular approach that focuses on the learner (rather than on subject matter). It is particularly relevant for our project since it can provide answers to both the questions that were raised in the ealier section: (1) What might be good ways of obtaining information from learners' biographies? and (2) Which parts of the biographies should be focused on?

Strategic Rhetoric: Another concept that helps us to focus on learners' biographies is *Strategic Rhetoric.* Defined as "the persuasive discourses that function hegemonically to continually re-secure the power of institutions by permeating the mundane talk of individuals" (Fassett & Warren, 2005), this concept proves useful when we consider the classroom as a community within the educational setting that creates politically driven interrelationships. This concept helps us acknowledge the student body as an active agent (rather than a passive participant) that shapes the teaching-learning process. Strategic rhetoric encourages us to closely observe the subtext in learners' narratives. Such observation provides useful data about the way learners position themselves in the classroom. We can use this data to create a meaningful curriculum.

Narrative Analysis: Since the method used to focus on learners' biographies is based on the analysis of narratives, it is vital to understand this concept. Narrative analysis directs attention to the narrative as a whole by focusing on sequence and themes (Reissman, 1993; Ochberg, 1994). It characteristically distinguishes itself from the analysis of 'moves' (as commonly attempted in discourse analysis). Thus, it assumes that in narrating their experiences, individuals are not merely involved in reporting but in actively constructing their identities. Since construction of identities is shared by metacognitive studies, analysis of strategic rhetoric, and narrative analysis, these three domains can coexist in a single research study.

Earlier Research

As indicated in the previous section, this paper draws on findings of earlier research in three fields: narrative analysis, metacognition, and strategic rhetoric. A number of works have dealt with narratives written by students. In their seminal work, Britton and Baxter (1999) explored the processes of personal and social transformation involved in becoming a mature age student. Drawing on the personal narratives of university students, they highlighted similarities and differences in accounts. This study argues that for these mature age students education seems to be a key site for the construction of their identity, although the meaning of education and its significance for self-identity varies. The novelty of this work lies in the fact that, unlike some earlier studies on mature age students, it focuses on the self as the central issue. Another interesting feature of this project is the idea of the self as a reflective project, and thus the study offers valuable insights into the processes of becoming a mature age student.

Apart from narrative analysis, our interest is also in research related to metacognition. In this context, one relevant piece of work is Schoonen et al. (2003) where the relative importance of linguistic knowledge, metacognitive knowledge, and fluency or accessibility of this linguistic knowledge in first language (Dutch) and second language (English) writing was explored. Using structural equation modeling, the relative importance of the three defined components was studied and compared across L1 and L2 writing. The fluency

measures seemed to correlate with overall writing performance in both L1 and L2. However, when compared to linguistic knowledge resources, these fluency measures turned out to have no additional value in predicting L1 or L2 writing performance. L2 writing proficiency turned out to be highly correlated with L1 writing proficiency, more than with either L2 linguistic knowledge or the accessibility of this knowledge. This work provides useful insights in the value of metacognitive research.

The issues of identity and self-awareness have been explored in several studies. Kruger and Dunning (1999) show that learners whose skills or knowledge bases are weak in a particular area tend to overestimate their ability in that area. In other words, learners may not recognize that they lack sufficient knowledge for accurate self-assessment. On the other hand, high-ability learners whose knowledge or skills are adequate or strong may tend to underestimate their ability. High-ability learners do not seem to recognize the extent and impact of their knowledge or skills. The work conclusively proves that for tasks involving logic and grammar, improved self-assessment corresponds with improvement in the skills being assessed.

The project that is the focus of the present paper concerns students whose identify is threatened by a 'stamped' failure at a stage of the educational system. (Our students failed the Qualifying English Test.) We can call such learners "at-risk" learners to signify their threatened identity. A highly relevant work in the context of "at-risk" students is by Fassett and Warren (2005). They explore how communication research on "at-risk" students relies on under-theorized understandings of identity as seemingly stable traits and characteristics. In this sense, "at-riskness," (or perceived failure) as a cultural identity, is detrimental to progress. Ideological tensions are explored through the analysis of a complex educational identity where they locate strategic rhetorics ("discursive constructions that reify normalized assumptions about educational success and failure"). This work is particularly relevant for the present study since it helps us connect metacognition with strategic rhetoric.

In their earlier work, Fassett and Warren (2004) have explored Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) notion of strategic rhetorics in relation to a series of focus group interviews with university

undergraduates and instructors about the nature of success and failure in education. Their analyses revealed three strategic rhetorics (*individualism*, *victimization*, and *authenticity*) in which learners and educators perceive success or failure by measuring how their intentions and motives measure up to a constructed and idealized standard. In this study, Fassett and Warren discovered that these strategic rhetorics functioned to reassert the dominance of the educational institution. The work also showed the role language plays in conceptualizing possibilities of educational change.

This brief literature review partly answers the first question raised earlier: *What might be good ways of obtaining information from learners' biographies?* A number of approaches are possible when we wish to focus on learners' biographies in an attempt to achieve curricular change. This review of earlier work leads us to exemplify one such approach. In this approach, we can identify the strategic rhetoric employed by learners in their written narratives about themselves. For the purpose of this study, we will be focusing on a particular aspect of the self: learners as writers. This specification helps us to achieve our particular purpose, since our aim is to formulate a writing curriculum. Secondly, we can try to identify the metacognitive aspects of the learners by probing into their written narratives. These specifications should help us to develop a learner profile that may pave the way to a structured writing curriculum. Since we need to look into learners' narratives to identify (1) their strategic rhetoric and (2) their metacognitive aspects of their metacognition, we need to study the methods used in narrative analysis. These methods focus us on the themes and stories woven into narratives.

Research Methodology

Research Questions

We are now in a better position and better equipped to define our research questions. While establishing the context for this study, we elaborated on the need to obtain and use information from learners' biographies. We stated that once we are convinced about this need, the next two questions that arise are:

(1) What might be good ways of obtaining information from learners' biographies?

(2) Which parts of the biographies should be focused on?

Our discussion on ealier research in the field has indicated two ways to explore learners' biographies. Focusing on the strategic rhetoric employed in narratives, we can guage the extent to which learners constuct, assert, and reassert their identities as agents of educational change. The second way to focus on the narratives is to consider them from metacognitive angles. Such analysis can shed light on aspects of self, learners' awareness of writing task(s), and their awareness of the strategies used/to be used in such tasks. In any project of this nature, the following kinds of inquiries can be made.

1. What is the metacognitive knowledge of students related to writing skills?

   More specifically:

   a How do students portray themselves as writers and as learners in writing course classrooms? How do they portray their knowledge about the factors that facilitate or inhibit their learning, their effectiveness as learners in general (self-efficacy beliefs), their ability to achieve specific learning goals (achievement beliefs), and their motivational beliefs?

   b What do students know about the nature and purpose of writing tasks and how do these serve their learning needs?

   c What learning strategies do students use (or are aware they should use) in their writing classrooms?

2. How can the metacognitive knowledge of students meaningfully inform:

   (a) the curriculum design and development of writing courses; and

   (b) possible pedagogical interventions in writing classrooms?

3. How do learners construct and reconstruct success and failure in writing? What rhetoric do they use to position themselves as writers? How do these rhetorical choices affect the possibilities of curricular changes?

Data Sources and Method of Analysis

The learners involved in this study were first year engineering students. All of them were from outside Singapore coming from Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, or Malaysia. They belonged to the 18-20 age-group. They had failed the Qualifying English Test (QET) administered by the university. All students who fail QET are given an extra non-credit English proficiency course. The present experiment was conducted at the beginning of this course.

The data was obtained from narratives handwritten by these students in response to the question: *How do you view yourself as a writer?*

The narratives written by the students were subjected to two phases of analysis. In Phase 1 analysis, each narrative was individually and independently analyzed to identify discourse moves, subtext, and strategic rhetoric. This part of the analysis investigated how strategic rhetoric was being used by the learners (as a cohesive group) to reassert their identity, learner profile, and learning needs within the existing educational practices. In Phase 2 analysis, these individual analyses were grouped on the basis of common themes. Phase 2 analysis was based on the premise that narratives are constructed to make sense of and impose meaning on experiences and to construct a sense of self (Kehily, 1995).

Sample Analyses and Discussion

Let us now analyze a narrative written by a student named Choon. (Participants are identified by nicknames throughout.) The complete narrative is given in Appendix 1. Our analysis reveals that Choon (1B) begins by acknowledging (Move 1). The subtext in Move 1 asserts his experience (Move 2) as a writer.

- *Although I learned to write when I were 12...*
- *When I were young, I sometimes scrawled on a page...*

– *My father always teached me and helped me in my writing when I was in primary.*

The text asserts the long learning and writing experience of Choon. However, as a student would do, the experience is underemphasized and couched into expressions such as 'although' and 'scrawled' that amount to concession rather than celebration. The subtext, however, tells us that Choon does wish to communicate a long learning experience. This sense is further strengthened by chronological narration where the writer indicates that he is not always a poor writer.

– *At that time, I have never thought that I was a poor writer.*

The subtext indicates that Choon perhaps fails to see his own case as a failed writer. However, due to his particular positioning (being in the class of students with a stamped failure), he has no other choice but accept that he is a poor writer. Very carefully, Choon indicates that he is not always a failure ("*I got satisfying grade in my O level exam.*"). It is interesting to note that the success (Choon got a satisfactory grade at O levels) is associated with good luck, while the failure (in QET) with lack of good writing habits.

– *I got satisfying grade in my O level exam. It was very lucky.*

– *I don't think that I have a good writing habits, that is why I failed in my English proficiency exam.*

Let us now analyze this narrative at the level of metacognition. The metacognitive analysis can be divided into three categories: *Person, Task,* and *Strategy.* These categories can be defined as follows.

Person: All that is known or believed about the characteristics of humans as cognitive beings. In this case, we focus on those parts of the narratives where feeling and attitudes are expressed. These might be towards the learning task, or may be about the past and present experiences of the learners. Such information may also include statements about the future, aspirations and ambitions, and intentions and plans to use the acquired learning.

Task: All information acquired by a person in terms of the task or different types of tasks, and appreciation of the quality of available information. In the case of a writing curriculum, this would mean awareness of text types, targeted audience, and purposes of writing. It would also involve the difficulty level expected and anticipated and the time and resources available for writing.

Strategies: Means chosen to succeed in various cognitive tasks. For writing tasks, it would be important for the learners to be aware of the process of academic writing, the stages involved, and the relative importance of each stage.

When we analyze the *Person* dimension in the narrative, Choon seems to view himself as a poor writer. However, deep down he seems to have a feeling that his writing is not too bad.

> *So I the thing I like least about writing is report and essay. I like best about writing is informal letter to friends. I feel relaxed to write letter because I don't need to care so much about grammatical using or think a lot about opinion.*

Regarding the *Task* dimension, there is not much information in the narrative, but writing is viewed as a serious, important, and thoughtful activity. In other narratives analyzed in this study, there is considerable information about the task dimension. Here is an example from Mun's narrative:

> *When I write, I will face a lot of difficulty such as grammar and tenses. The problem can cause me slow down and the other side my marks will be reduced. As a good writer we need to read a lot of magazines and newspaper. This kind of material will provide me a lot of informations and ideas.*

In terms of the *Strategy* dimension, Choon seems to be well aware of the stages of the writing process: *When I have to write something, I usually spend a lot of time to think about what to say and generally how to say it.* He also seems to know his problems and his goals in the writing class:

I also unable to write perfectly, because I am lack of vocabulary.

I think I should do hard and read more to improve my writing.

Similar to Choon's narrative, other narratives in this study indicated that a number of students seem to have knowledge of the writing process. The following is an example from Mun's narrative:

> *Writing is very important to everybody. First of all we need to organize ours thought into many steps. Planning is the most important thing, that we have to begin our writing. We need to plan our time and writing process. Usually I write when I was requested to write. When inside the exam hall, time allowed is not much. So time is very important for me. I spent almost 25% of my writing on planning and the rest I would write down on paper.*

It needs to be noted here that the course syllabus included lectures and discussions on the process of academic writing. With several narratives such as Choon's and Mun's indicating the students' familiarization with the writing process, the instructor needed to modify the CIA and spare the students re-teaching of these processes.

Coming back to Choon's narrative (Appendix 1), Choon's writing can also be assessed keeping the focus on the main theme rather than on analysis of moves. Choon's narrative conveys the main theme of *Struggling against the odds* to surmount the mundane (for Choon) problems of writing. Choon was obviously inspired to write at an early age. His family seems to have provided further encouragement and, possibly, writing was considered to be a good thing in family circles. This situation changed when school education came along. Apparently, there was not much scope and not many opportunities provided for writing. This seems to have resulted in weakening Choon's confidence in his own writing abilities. Choon still liked writing, but the educational system's focus on form ("grammatical using") and emphasis on originality ("think a lot about opinion") further weakened Choon's confidence. The struggle against odds continued with a stamped failure when Choon failed the Qualifying English Test at the university. In the

account, there are a couple of moments of realization where Choon seems to recall something more about the process of writing. Strategically, Choon seems to convey (Move 3) his respect for the examination system (although the system has been erratic in his case). The narrative indicates a need for individual goal-oriented guidance for Choon, rather than a straight-jacketed course which will involve revision and re-teaching.

Analyzing Strategic Rhetoric: Some Examples

We decided to study discourse strategies along with metacognition since identity is "rhetorically constituted through discursive strategies" (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995: 303). Thus, for the purpose of our study, both metacognition and strategic rhetoric are crucial aspects of learners' identity which affect the teaching-learning process. While defining *strategy*, Nakayama and Krizek, (1995: 35) note that a strategy is a "calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that become possible as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, and a scientific institution) and can be isolated." This definition can be loosely applied to a student body that is cohesive and wishes to have an impact on teaching practices using the discursive power that is available to them. Written and spoken narratives allow the construction of this rhetorically constituted identity. As stated earlier, we used the model presented in the work of Fassett and Warren (2005) in which three types of strategic rhetoric are identified. These are specific discursive constructions that persist in the narratives. These three types of rhetoric are (1) *individualism*, or the notion that it is only, or primarily, through individual action or choice that one might succeed or fail in schools; (2) *victimization*, the abjection of individualism, which suggests that one is at the mercy of social systems for assessments of success or failure and (3) *authenticity*, typically constructing a sense of failure to measure up to the standards that are far-removed from immediate contexts. Descriptions of these three types of rhetoric are presented below.

Individualism: Zhang, Low

The position reflected in the rhetoric of individualism locates one's success or failure in individual decisions and actions. The following extract from Zhang's narrative reflects this rhetoric.

(Opening) *At first, I will talk about my writing attitudes, habits, and processes, then you will know why I am a poor writer. I will also talk about how I can try my best to improve my writing skills*

(Body-Para1) *I am a little lazy and hate writing even in Chinese. When I have to write something, I usually put it off as long as I can. Though sometimes I finish writing my essay, I hardly spend time going over it.*

(Conclusion) *No pains, no gains. I'll put my heart into English learning and I think I can be much better in English soon.*

Zhang's narrative projects his own case as a 'failure' and locates the sources of failure in the decisions taken by him. ("*I usually put it off as long as I can.*") More importantly, Zhang seems to define for himself the processes that should lead to success: being proactive, revising, and working hard. By using these constructions, the writer seems to indirectly downplay the role of the classroom. By making themselves solely responsible for learning and by locating all learning resources within themselves, individual (rather than relational) goals are emphasized. The objectives of a fixed curriculum, activities that induce group learning, and the role of instructors as facilitators and managers become less important in comparison with individual definitions, personal objectives, and self-oriented learning principles. Although the apparent construction of this position can reify the concept of responsible learner, it needs to be mentioned that the strategy of individualization can oversimplify the intricate nature of the educational system in general and (in our case) the processes of writing in particular. This is because the strategy can be specifically oblivious to educational factors outside the learner's control. This can also be seen in the narrative of Low:

> *I think it is very difficult to become a good writer. The important thing when we are writing is our writing attitudes. But for me, I feel very difficult to start because I can't get a good idea and decide which are the most important point. The thing I like least about writing is I think it is quite boring. However, when I have finished writing, I feel very proud of myself.*

In the examples above (Zhang and Low), the following relevant factors outside the learner's control seem to have been ignored:

- Assessment standards
- Variation(s) in standards of writing
- Logistics of assessment
- Peer influence on processes and product
- Tutor intervention and tutor influence

The rhetoric of individualization is significantly beneficial to create a motivated environment that encourages hard work. However, the instructor needs to bear in mind that more misdirected learners are likely to align themselves with this rhetoric.

Victimization: Seo, Mun, Xu

The strategy of victimization is seemingly the exact opposite of the strategy of individualization. In the rhetoric of individualization, one constantly looks within oneself to attribute sources of success and failure. Victimization, in its extreme form, does the exact opposite, and denies the individual while attributing success and failure to external agencies surrounding the self. In the narrative below by Seo, failure is related to the educational system ("the countless essays given"), indirect attribution to the socio-economic factors ("the environment I was raised up in"), positioning in the family ("the eldest"), parents' weak educational background, and the resultant lack of educational guidance at home.

> (Opening): *"I do remember the numerous essays written as a student. I have always been weak in my language and thus I have a hard time writing the countless*

> *essays given. Perhaps it is the environment I was raised up in. I am the eldest in my family. My father is not very well-educated while my mother had never been to school before. Hence should I face any difficulties in my school work, I have no one to turn to."*

When Seo makes references to the external factors within which the self is located, the narrative recreates the idea of a system (defined with a reference to lack of access) that might have contributed to success. Conducive socio-economic factors, family background, and a more compassionate education system seem to be the main pillars of the defined route to success.

The rhetoric of victimization becomes particularly interesting and relevant for the CIA developer when the individuals seem to refer particularly to the education system (rather than broad social systems). Such references might be softer and indirect. For instance, in the following narrative, Mun rightly complains about the inadequate writing tasks and writing topics that are often included in the CIA of writing courses. Such topics fail to nurture creativity and can result in a stamped failure even with potentially creative writers.

> *I do remember my first writing was in primary school. I think that draft was about my family. Generally writing can be said interesting if the topics of that writing are interesting to me. I still remember when I was in secondary school, I found that writing was so interesting when my head jumps up a lot of ideas. Until now because of less reading, I feel writing is boring and sometimes I feel scared about it.*

In another example, Xu points to another weak aspect of writing courses: the timed examinations. As most instructors know, such tests and examinations seem to be tests of speed (How *much* can you write?) rather than of power (How *well* can you write?). Xu points to this fact stating that he is in fact not such a weak writer:

> *I like writing even I am not good at it. Before I went into middle school, I had developed the attitude that I should do each of compositions as better as I can. I tried to write essays where ideas that I like, when I had enough*

time to do with them. In examination, I always had little time to finish them, so the best composition to be written that I was proud of were producted in my spare time, not in examinations.

A characteristic finding of this study is the apparent lack of victimization rhetoric in most of the student narratives. In numerical terms, we found 27 instances of individualization and 17 instances of authenticity, while there were only five clear instances of the rhetoric of victimization, a couple of them rather indirect. A comment on this finding will be made after we discuss the next type of rhetoric: Authenticity.

Authenticity: Chet, Zhang, John

Either explicitly or implicitly, this rhetoric appeals to the notion of what is 'actual' or 'real.' The actual or real can stem from created standards, created models of success, or observed standards in the popular culture. The rhetoric can include references to failure to measure up to standards as can be seen in Chet's narrative below.

(Body-Para 1): *After four months and the first semester is over. Basically, my English is improved but I still fail the English proficiency. So now I must take this subject again. The problem I am most afraid of is the close text (Cloze test) as I can't find the suitable word to fill in. May be because my vocabulary is not enough. Also the comprehension. I can't understand thoroughly. So make me lose many marks in this section. I think my grammar still OK. My composition is not good...* (etc.)

This narrative indicates Chet's belief in the accuracy of the measurement of proficiency made by the proficiency examination. Chet constructs his own view of what language proficiency constitutes. The authentic structure of language proficiency created by Chet consists of vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and composition. Chet believes that by improving vocabulary, reading comprehension, and composition, he can pass the examination as well as improve his proficiency in English. The authenticity rhetoric in Chet's narrative equated success in the examination with

language proficiency. While the narrative takes a restrictive view of proficiency by defining it in terms of success in the examination, some narratives seem to take a broader view. For instance, in Zhang's narrative below popular culture is held as a model.

> (Body): *I think to do something, the most important element is interests. If we are interested in something, we can do it with full heart and do it well. But I am really not interested in writing in English. So I think I have a very bad attitude toward English-writing. But since we live in Singapore and study in NTU, we must master the writing skills well...*

Zhang relies on shared knowledge and does not elaborate on the status of English in Singapore and in the university. However, the narrative makes it clear that the writer's attitude is clearly influenced by a created standard in the narrower realms of the society. Another interesting feature of this rhetoric of authenticity is the creation of a mythical standard. This standard can be provided by past experiences, impressions of peers, or created from a far-removed (and unrealistic) standard created for oneself. As an example, let us look into a part of John's narrative:

> (Body-Para 2): *As a matter of fact I had never read a story book until I am serving the Navy. It is during this period of time that I had cultivated a good habit of reading. In particular, I like books written by Michael Crichton. I had read a couple of his books and found them not only interesting but very realistic. Through reading his books, I had found out that a good writer not only must be able to convey his ideas and thoughts clearly to the reader but he must be knowledgeable too.*

The standard or the ideal (native English-speaking writer of best selling fiction) mentioned here might be considered to some extent 'mythical' since it is so far removed from the learners' immediate context (writing classroom of second language learners being educated in academic writing). By pitching his writing against this native-speaker standard, John unwittingly ensures that his writing will never 'pass' his eligibility test. John's own reconstruction of his writing is thus sustained as inferior and the

powerful and overwhelming effect of his mythical reconstruction might become a hindrance in his learning process.

As mentioned earlier, it was surprising to note the apparent lack of instances of the rhetoric of victimization in most of the student narratives. Speaking simplistically, this may mean that the learners involved in this study are ready to take responsibility for their learning (individualization) creating goals, models, and ideals for themselves (authenticity) rather than attributing their failure to external agencies (victimization). However, our findings suggest that such an analysis may be overly simplistic since a study of strategic rhetoric actually points to other signs of danger. For example, if learners are falsely or inaccurately locating the reasons for their stamped failure within their own self, they may be doing themselves a great disservice. Such misplaced alignments can obstruct their learning. Similarly, aligning their goals and ideals with remote or 'mythical' identities might do more harm than good for their learning if such 'mythical' identities are too far-removed from the situational goals. The instructor building a CIA needs to perform two important tasks in this situation. On the one hand, counseling and advising learners on the internal and external agencies that may contribute to learning success, and on the other creating a CIA that focuses on more realistic, usable, and contextualized ideals, models, and goals for writing activities and writing practice.

The learners' initial attempts to project their identities in their narratives may be subtle and, at times, unreadable for an outsider. However, for an instructor, reading these narratives and analyzing these reconstructions can be a rewarding experience. Many of these misconstructions, reconstructions, and imagined possibilities may usefully feed into curriculum development at the beginning of a writing course.

Conclusion

The narrative analysis, strategic rhetoric, and aspects of metacognition looked at in this study lead us to ask new and different questions about curricular practices. This paper earlier positioned itself using a metaphor from the medical profession "*Why does it hurt?*" and "*What happened?*" rather than the more

traditional "*Where does it hurt?*" In this study of learner narratives, we focused on the learners' identity as writers and assumed that this identity is rhetorically constructed, and analyzed how three types of rhetoric can affect the classroom learning and writing curriculum-in-action. We hope that the sample analyses in this paper can indicate a range of strategies for responding effectively to student needs, including ways to affirm, challenge, and negate various rhetorics by providing clear and well-directed feedback. It would be interesting to see how our pedagogical choices are shaped by these analyses, and how it can make curriculum more responsive to student perceptions. Here are at least three ways in which analysis can pave the way towards a better structured writing curriculum:

1. To determine student *readiness:* To gauge their background knowledge, to identify what they already know, what they want to know, and what they have learned about writing.
2. To determine student *interest*: To locate information in the narratives, to determine what specific interests they have in a particular topic, and to build writing activities to incorporate these interests into their lessons.
3. To identify student *learning styles* and environmental *preferences*: To identify preferences and styles that might contribute to or inhibit student learning.

In further research, it would be interesting to see the cross-connections between strategic rhetoric and metacognitive analysis. It would also be interesting to see whether student perceptions of task and strategy match or conflict with their performance on writing tasks. More research is necessary to formulate a blueprint of action that would suggest more concrete ways to use narrative analysis while preparing a curriculum in action (CIA) for writing courses. While defining a socio-cultural approach to identity formation, Penuel and Wertsch (1995: 91) suggest "...that identity be conceived as a form of action that is first and foremost rhetorical, concerned with persuading others (and oneself) about who one is and what one values to meet different purposes: express or create solidarity, opposition, difference, similarity, love, friendship, and so

on." A study of learner narratives may or may not answer our questions about teaching and learning processes. However, it does lead us to ask new and different questions about them. As educators, it makes us sit up and explore a range of strategies for responding effectively to the rhetoric in students' narratives. These strategies can range from affirming a student's created identity to providing directive feedback on the way they envision and re-imagine the learning environment. I would therefore like to conclude using the words of Giddens (1991: 53): "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space, but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent."

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Appendix

The Narrative of Choon

I am not a very skillful writer. Although I learned to write when I were 12 years old, I am still thinking that writing is a tough work for me.

When I were young, I sometimes scrawled on a page and call it words. My father always teached and helped me in my writing when I was in primary. At that time, I have never thought that I was a poor writer. However, when I was in secondary school, I did not have much time to practise my writing, so my writing was getting poorer and poorer, and I started to think that I was a poor writer. Although I was not very skillful in my writing, I got satisfying grade in my 'O' level exam. It was very lucky for me.

Today, I usually find that writing a good piece is a difficult job for me. I always lack of opinion and vocabulary. Therefore I always get attacks of anxiety when I have to do a writing assignment for school or work. So I the thing I like least about writing is report and essay. I like best about writing is informal letter to friends. I feel relaxed to write letter because I don't need to care so much about grammatical using or think a lot about opinion.

I don't think that I have a good writing habits. That is why I failed in my English proficiency exam. When I have to write something, I usually spend a lot of time to think about what to say and generally how to say it. However most of the time, get nothing. I cannot think out a good point even that I spend a lot of time. Therefore finally I do not have enough time to complete my writing. Even though I have a good point, I also unable to write perfectly because I am lack of vocabulary.

In the conclusion, I think I should do hard and read more to improve my writing and learn more useful vocab.