Teacher Narration in English: Pedagogic Literary Narration

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Narratives are central to English, and especially to literary study. Narrative forms of literary fiction and drama dominate curricular programmes of study and demand substantial amounts of teaching time. The process of narration preoccupies English teachers too. How do narrators in novels present information to us as readers? How do they guide our responses? Though we recognise 'narration' as a key concept in English, we have directed less systematic attention to narration by English teachers and its distinctiveness as a feature of subject pedagogy. The skill teachers of English demonstrate when they present and frame narrative texts for students is expert and subtle, often involving re-narration of episodes in a study text, purposed to specific learning goals. Even adept practitioners, with great humility, describe their whole-class teaching around narrative texts as 'just reading', though they shape engaging, thought-provoking and often profound encounters with literature. It is important to acknowledge this dimension of subject expertise, to identify it and describe it. Doing so allows us to recognise expert practice, and can inform mentoring to guide new teachers of English rapidly towards these high-level skills. The best possible student experiences of literary narrative texts are at stake.

The recently introduced Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019a) and the related ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019b) include narration by teachers as part of the 'minimum entitlement' of current teacher preparation. Requirements for classroom practice (Teachers' Standard 4: 'plan and teach well-structured lessons, p.17) identify the importance for new teachers of 'narrating thought processes when modelling to make explicit how experts think'. This could entail 'asking questions aloud that pupils should consider when working independently and drawing pupils' attention to links with prior knowledge'. These frameworks apply across disciplines, presented with the caveat that 'subject and phase specific' training is still essential, in 'coherently sequenced curricula', to meet the needs of new entrants to the profession.

Here I outline a conception of reading narrative texts distinctive to the discipline, a form of teacher narration for English that I call Pedagogic Literary Narration (Gordon, 2020). This conception of teacher narration for English exemplifies narrating-for-teaching as articulated in the Early Career Framework and ITT Core Content Framework. Moreover, it encompasses several dimensions of their 'classroom practice' requirements in a unitary conception of teacher narration as expert pedagogy for

the discipline. With reference to transcripts of classroom interactions in English, this article shows how Pedagogic Literary Narration embeds teaching moves such as introducing 'new material in steps, explicitly linking new ideas to what has been previously studied and learned', modelling responses to texts to help 'pupils understand new processes and ideas', and making 'abstract ideas concrete and accessible'. This process of 'just reading' guides and scaffolds students' responses to literature, explicitly and tacitly 'teaching pupils metacognitive strategies linked to subject knowledge' and incorporating questioning 'for many purposes, including to check pupils' prior knowledge, assess understanding and break down problems'. As teachers orchestrate Pedagogic Literary Narration in whole-class reading, they also promote 'high-quality classroom talk' to 'support pupils to articulate key ideas, consolidate understanding and extend their vocabulary'. To an observer, whether a trainee teacher or perhaps an appraiser-colleague who is not an English specialist, Pedagogic Literary Narration can look easy and intuitive. The examples shown here mark its expert character. The discussion that follows proposes that better understanding of teacher narration in English can inform subject mentoring, professional development and ultimately student learning and enjoyment of literary narratives.

This version of teacher narration frames literary study texts, given narratives, according to specific goals that distinguish classroom experiences of story from students' encounters with narratives for leisure outside school. While English teachers seek to preserve something of the immediacy of these given narratives as stories enjoyed for their own sake, they also present them according to objectives linked to curricular objectives or exam specifications. This is a form of dual reading, which impels different emphases from reading for pleasure. It is often selective depending on whether the teacher wants to ensure students notice and remember key details of narrative exposition in an opening chapter, or alternatively to foreground authors' presentation of characters relative to the demands of a formulaic GCSE examination question. As teachers frame texts in this way, they create a distinctive narrative experience which is simultaneously one of the text's story but also one shaped to educational ends.

Pedagogic Literary Narration is a form of teacher narration shaped by 'big picture' decisions of how many weeks and lessons to spend on the novel or play for study, which passages to address in class time and how to assess students' responses (Gordon, 2019a). It also operates at the level of teacher exposition, even in individual turns of conversation. The research informing this disciplinary version of teacher narration found that spoken quotation is one of its most important and frequent features. Across a sequence of six lessons, one teacher embedded quotations in her talk in a third of all her turns in whole-class discussion. Sometimes her turns incorporated multiple quotations, skilfully weaving them together to demonstrate interpretive analysis of the text, at others merging them with paraphrased versions of episodes in the novel in highly efficient abridgement. While the frequency of quotations in classroom talk for English may not be a surprise for subject experts, it constitutes a distinctive feature of our disciplinary teaching. Pedagogic Literary Narration accounts for the different

functions of spoken quotation in English classroom talk (Gordon, 2019b), often achieving educational ends outlined in the generic Early Career Framework list of teaching skills required for effective classroom practice. The resources of Pedagogic Literary Narration are simple, free and available to us all. This outline of Pedagogic Literary Narration provides a language for describing their place in English teaching, for making the most of them for our learning and that of students.

Pedagogic Literary Narration through whole-class discussion

In this first sequence of talk, an experienced teacher of English presents Penelope Lively's novel *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe* for a Year 7 class (aged 11-12). The discussion derives from the second lesson on the book. As the teacher reads passages, it is the first occasion students encounter these episodes of the novel's narrative. The teacher alternates between reading passages aloud and eliciting students' comments across turns in the conversation. In addition, the teacher guides students' attention to the voice of the narrator, James, also the novel's protagonist:

01	Teacher	I'm going to read a little bit more to you and I want you to be thinking about whether there's anything that comes up about language, interests or attitudes when I read this next paragraph. We got half-way down page six last lesson and I'm just going to read a little bit more: *They were almost home now. James could see the window of his attic room, staring over towards the church. The cottage was small, square and comfortable. Coming to live in it had been like putting on an old coat. It had a sagging slate roof, a bulge at one end where once there had been a bread oven, huge beams, creaking stairs, and stone floors with interesting cracks from which emerged, at night, large and stately black beetles. James was making a study of the black beetles. It was going to be called The Life Cycle of a British Beetle by Dr James Harrison, FRS, MP, DPhil, OBE. Helen preferred the new houses in the estate the other side of Ledsham, where she already had a network of friends.* I think that's Mrs Harrison, Helen. Already in that paragraph I think we've got something that we could answer. Yes, Ben?
02	Ben	Helen's his sister.
03	Teacher	Oh, it's his sister, I beg your pardon, yes. We know he's got a sister, can we say anything about his language there?
04	Emma	No.

05	Teacher	Why not?
06	Aysha	He doesn't really… actually, he's quite formal.
07	Leon	He didn't actually speak.
08	Teacher	He didn't actually speak, but it's interesting, because Aysha you're saying it's quite formal. Leon is saying he didn't speak, you're saying it's quite formal, and I think you're both right, because there's no dialogue there, there are no speech marks to say that he has spoken, but have a look at it. Read through it again to yourself. Why does Aysha think it's quite formal and that that's got to do with James? Have just a read through again now.

Consistent with the terminology of the Early Career Framework, this exchange introduces new material, the paragraph read aloud (turn 1). It is a first step accompanied with brief focussed questioning helping students reflect upon and understand the narrative perspective. The teacher gently guides exploration of narrative voice, making this 'abstract idea' and key concept in literary study 'concrete and accessible' by eliciting students' comments and foregrounding a problem – the paradox that Leon and Aysha are both right in their assertions about the narrative voice. By introducing the paradox for collective consideration, the teacher concurrently scaffolds students' responses (most obviously by inviting them to resolve the tension between two apparently contradictory assertions), and guides lert and self-aware reading. The process of reading then reviewing the text in this way brings the usually private, internal process of literary reading into the public forum of the class. It is a metacognitive strategy 'linked to subject knowledge', a deliberate and subject-specific demonstration of an expert reading process.

After allowing students brief reflection time and some asides managing students' attention, the discussion continues with new student comments:

13	Lucy	It's like he's thinking it. He's not actually saying it, but he's thinking it.
14	Teacher	He's thinking it. How do you know he's thinking it?
15	Sam	Because it says… he's thinking of him writing stuff about the black beetle.
16	Teacher	Yeah, you're right, it doesn't actually say, *"James thought to himself…"* but we know they're his ideas and he's come up with a title, which sounds quite formal, doesn't it? 'The Life Cycle of a British Beetle'. He's thinking of himself as a doctor, as a DPhil, an OBE, all this sort of thing, and that is very formal, isn't it? What does that tell us about James? What about the type of character? Emma?

17	Emma	Quite posh.
18	Teacher	Yes, quite well educated I would say. Probably from a middle-class family, yes.

This mode of framing the narrative involves rapid, efficient questioning. These questions demonstrate functions matching ECF details on effective classroom practice, representing skilled formative assessment to clarify salient dimensions of narrative perspective for both the individual students speaking with the teacher, and for the whole class. This process of reading and reviewing the novel shows that Pedagogic Literary Narration entails marking key features of texts publically, for all students, to support their comprehension of focal passages and aid continuing understanding of the novel as it unfolds over subsequent lessons. Across turns 13 to 18, with economy, the teacher elicits identification of the narrative voice as a representation of the protagonist's inner speech. She elaborates the point (turn 16), marking it again for the benefit of all students by paraphrasing the novel, a form of recasting which is a frequent feature of Pedagogic Literary Narration: 'he's thinking of himself as a doctor, as a DPhil, an OBE, all this sort of thing, and that is very formal, isn't it?' The action is brief, guiding students towards interpretive response then overtly signalled with 'what does this tell us about James?'

This last extract from the conversation shows again the scaffolding function of Pedagogic Literary Narration, orienting to the passage of text read aloud in the first extract of conversation, now to introduce the specialist terminology of literary criticism and classify the narrative voice of the passage:

19	David	Didn't they say their house was quite big as well, so they'd have to be quite rich and formal?
20	Teacher	Possibly. Although when this was written, you could get a lot more for your money, especially in a rural area, so that's always a difficult one to judge. But you're right to be thinking about that sort of thing. So, we know that he's thinking it, but it doesn't actually say *"he thought…"* Who is telling us these things? Hannah, who is telling us these things?
21	Hannah	What, who's telling us what he thought?
22	Teacher	Yeah.
23	Hannah	I thought it was the author.
24	Teacher	Not the author, you're close. What do we call the person that tells… Isaac?
25	Isaac	The narrator.

26	Teacher	The narrator, so the narrator is telling us this sort of thing. Is it a first-person narrative or a third-person narrative, if the narrator is telling us…?
27	Pupils	Third.
28	Teacher	It's the third-person, well done, and what does the third-person narrator enable us to understand about the different characters?
29	Isaac	Their personalities.
30	Teacher	All of them, exactly, well done. We can get into the heads of any character we like through the narrator, can't we?

That final turn represents an important pedagogic move, drawing from the unique and specific details of one text a general point about the affordance of narrative voice and what it offers readers of fiction. At turn 20, the teacher pivoted away from a brief exchange considering contextual details with David, briskly moving from 'intensive' reading to general 'extensive' reading likely to inform students' developing skills as literary readers. Within and across these extracts, then, we see the framing function of Pedagogic Literary Narration. It embeds a given narrative, often recasts it, and marks features for students' immediate and longitudinal attention. It is 'pedagogic' and 'literary' because it seeks to develop students' literary reading, dually guiding their engagement and understanding of the focal text, and gradually inducting them to the discourse and reading orientations of literary analysis. It is a form of teacher narration unique to English.

Pedagogic Literary Narration in teacher exposition

While the patterns of classroom dialogue represented above may be familiar to many English teachers as conventions of the discipline, the expertise that enables their effective conduct is easily overlooked when it is fluent and apparently natural. The subtle skill of English teachers is also evident in spontaneous exposition, which frames given narratives and directs students' literary reading even within single turns of talk. In this example from a Year 10 lesson on *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and other stories* (Stevenson, 1886), focussed on Chapter 10 ('The Last Night'), the teacher comments on a conversation between the characters Poole and Mr Utterson. To foreground Utterson's feelings, the teacher combines paraphrased fragments of the story with direct quotations representing his speech. Each of these actions mediates the text's given narrative for students.

This transcript highlights these mediating resources by attributing quoted material to the 'Page', distinguishing words of the book from the words of the teacher in which they are embedded. Additionally, the transcript uses some conventions of Conversation Analysis transcription to show patterns of emphasis (underlined words), rising and falling tone (up and down arrows; colons), relative increases in pace (>between arrows <) and pauses (in brackets, by fractions of a second).

Combined, these annotations reveal the teacher's intense, emphatic and dramatizing presentation of text, embedding fragments of quoted text:

Teacher: he's scared (.) okay: >he actually physically says< (0.2)

Page: I'm afraid

Teacher: o:kay (.) erm (.) it's building up: (.) the fear: and the tension (.) okay (.)

Page: I can bear it no more: (0.5)

Teacher: erm, we don't know why Poole is scared (.) he deliberately (0.2) erm (.) >evades the question< when he- when erm when th- when the >lawyer Utterson< says

Page: now my good man be expli:cit (.) what are you ↑afraid of?

Teacher: okay (.) he's doggedly dis - disregarding the question (0.2) he: is deliberately avoiding ↓answering that question (0.5) >it builds up the suspense< yknow, the theme of mystery (0.1) okay? (.) so as(0.2) as we come into that paragraph on pathetic: fallacy: we already appreciate how the characters are feeling: (.) they are go- they are going to:: Jekyll's house now >to find out< (.) what (.) on earth is going on (.) >we don't know< as a character we don't know (.) what is happening: okay (.) but we do know that Jekyll's been >locking himself up again: < (.) okay (0.2) erm (.) and we know that Poole is >very very< afraid: (0.4) alri:ght, so something >is- isn't right something is wrong< (0.4) .hh and then the writer Stevenson u::ses pathetic fallacy (.) to c- to build up:on that tension: (0.2) okay and build upon: the suspense

The turn is efficient in placing students in at least four reading positions, some of them concurrently. The first use of a spoken quotation (I'm afraid) draws students into Poole's psychological state and therefore into the text's diegetic world (*diegetic positioning*). It embodies Poole by dramatizing 'afraid' and emphasizing his fear. At the same time, emphasis, pauses around the quotation and the teacher's statement that 'he actually physically says' mark the quotation as distinct from the teacher's own voice and highlight its status as a quotation in place of the quotation marks we would find in writing. These serve to say 'look here, this is a quotation', and invite students to see it as an object for literary analysis (*analytic positioning*). The teacher also makes an explicit statement about the author's craft, about how the passage builds suspense, illustrating with the quotation 'I can bear it no more'. Here the teacher seems to enact suspense through emphasis of both the quotation and each abstract noun in her statement on 'the fear and the tension'. The rhythm and stress tie her statement and the quotation together, convey building suspense with intermittent stress, and invite students to notice tension as an aesthetic quality of literary craft (*aesthetic positioning*). Across the turn, the teacher utters her own words, voices the text's narrative voice, and voices its characters. Together, through resources that demonstrate and embody qualities of the text, and with explicit appeals to

reading positions ('we don't know why Poole is scared'), the entire turn prompts students' reaction to quotations and reflection on the episode (*interpretive positioning*). The efficiency we saw in whole-class discussion is evident at this micro level, where Pedagogic Literary Narration recasts the source text while positioning students in differing orientations to the text (see figure 1, item 5). The teacher's turn realizes diegetic, analytic, aesthetic and interpretive functions to guide students' experience of the given narrative while also developing their growth as attentive and self-aware literary readers. 'Just reading' proves to be a sophisticated form of teacher narration in English.

Pedagogic Literary Narration in ITT and Early Career development

The ITT Core Content Framework specifies trainees should enjoy 'multiple opportunities to rehearse and refine particular approaches, possibly beginning outside the classroom before using approaches in classrooms'. Pedagogic Literary Narration can be illustrated with transcripts, as in this article, as the basis for discussion even before entrants to teaching observe experienced colleagues or attempt to guide literary study themselves. In ITT sessions for several providers, I have the transcripts like play scripts. Trainees take teacher and student parts, re-voicing the real exchange in their training environment. The exercise is important in signalling practical factors such as the time it takes to read passages aloud. It also conveys ratios of teacher-to-student talk in conversations across literary analyses according to varying foci, different year groups and different stages of progress through texts. Stepping back from reading aloud to scrutinise the transcripts allows reflection on in-the-moment teacher actions and speculation about the rationale for their decisions. Trainees can attend to details that may not feature in the lesson planning of experienced teachers, but which can be prepared and attempted with intent in their own lesson designs. Further activities use short transcripts annotated to Conversation Analysis conventions, where participants read them and try to replicate the distinctive emphasis of original teacher turns. The rhythms can seem strange, even mannered, but draw attention to subtle features of teachers' craft so they become more audible as trainees observe (and hear) the lessons of experienced colleagues. Beyond reading aloud, the training also highlights the ways teachers orient students' reading positions, providing resources to guide observations of others and their own lesson evaluations (see figure 1).

Of course, these are tools for mentoring too. Making brief audio recordings of classroom dialogue, listening back and reflecting on how teachers orchestrate Pedagogic Literary Narration are low-cost and immediate methods, well matched to English literature and its teaching as verbal arts. They are easily adopted in ITT and Early Career CPD, affording systematic and precise attention to teacher narration in English. Perhaps most important of all, the concept of Pedagogic Literary Narration provides a common frame for teachers to identify and discuss nuances of. English expertise that promote students' learning. This is teacher narration to ensure students' engagement and enjoyment with literary narratives, and their growth as literary critics.

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Figure 1

Pedagogic Literary Narration – observation and evaluation tool

Observing other teachers / Evaluating your own teaching

Before the lesson, identify a phase where whole-class reading and discussion of the study novel will take place. Make brief notes of the focus and aims of that phase here:

Novel title:
Pages / extract:
Aim of phase:

Pedagogic Literary Narration

1. Which features of narrative did the teacher/you explicitly frame and emphasise for pupils' attention?

2. What was most interesting about how the teacher/you presented the narrative for pupils?
   Could include sequencing, balance of text-reading and asides/questions, when and how text-reading was interrupted, pace of reading, aspects of intonation, mix of comment and reading/quotation of text, balance of teacher/ pupil contribution…

3. How did pupils respond to the narrative as a result of this presentation of the novel?

4. How did presentation of the novel highlight or emphasise features of the text's narrative, either

   a) to reinforce the overtly stated aspects for attention (identified in Q1)
   b) to influence pupils' experience of the novel in other, perhaps tacit, ways?

Spoken quotation

5. How did the teacher use spoken quotation to position pupils' reading of the text, and to what effect?

Type of positioning	Function	Example	Effect
diegetic	brings pupils into the novel's world – emotive/dramatic		
analytic	Isolates spoken quotations for analysis		
aesthetic	emphasises or enacts aesthetic qualities of the text for appreciation		
interpretive	directs attention to possible readings of the text		