

Learners Live: Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

This paper, looks at the use of learner narratives of their own language learning histories as a research generation. Although the use of narratives as a research tool has a long history in general education it has only recently gained momentum in language teaching.

The paper will look at the emergence of narrative as a research generation in the context of learner-centred curriculum development, as well as at the use of learners' stories in pedagogy and research. The second part of the paper, will illustrate the use of narrative as a research tool with reference to a large-scale, longitudinal study.

Keywords

Learner narratives, Narratives as a research generation, Learner-centred curriculum, Pedagogy and research, Longitudinal study,

Introduction: Narrative as a research tradition

Stories touch the human heart as well as the mind. From time immemorial they have provided a vehicle for entertainment, but, more importantly in pre- and non-literature Societies, For passing cultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

As communicative language teaching found its way into the classroom in the form of pair and group work, role plays, simulations and the like, interest grew in what learners had to make of these new techniques. This led to a series of investigations into the attitudes of teachers and learners towards what happens in the classroom, research that was funded by the National Curriculum Development Centre for the Australia Adult Immigrant Education Program. A full account of these studies can be found in Nunan 1988. (See also, Brindley, 1984)

Rubin and Thompson (1982) used interviews and learner narratives to investigate the characteristics of the 'good' language learner. Despite a diversity of approaches and preferences, they were able to identify a number of characteristics that indicated a degree of autonomy in the approaches of good learners.

In a subsequent study into the 'good' language learner, Nunan (1991) collected learning histories from forty-four learners who had attained bilingual competence in foreign language contexts. The research focused in particular on what informants found most helpful and what they found least helpful in learning English as a foreign language.

This research underlined the importance of incorporating learners' views on the nature of language learning and teaching into the curriculum planning and implementation process.

By collecting data directly from learners themselves it became clear that learning Processes are complex, organic and inherently unstable, that there is considerable Diversity in the beliefs and

attitudes of individual learners and that teaching is less about transmitting information than about creating contexts and opportunities for learners to find their own best ways.

Benson (2005:21) coined the terms '(auto)biography' to indicate that "in the context of second language learning research, the data are as a rule first-person (autobiographical) accounts of experience that are analysed either by the subject of the research (autobiographically) or by another researcher (biographically)".

Chik (2004: 5) argues that the biographical approach puts people at the centre of the research process, providing a means by which researchers can facilitate an individual's recreation of their past, present and future from an insider's perspective.

Until recently, the use of narrative, (auto) biography or 'storytelling' been overlooked in language learning research, it has a considerable, if somewhat controversial, history in general education research. Denny, one of the early proponents of the approach, champions its use in the following way:

Storytelling is unlikely to help in the creation or evaluation of educational remedies, but can facilitate problem definition. Problem definition compared to problem solving in an underdeveloped field in education." (Denny, 1978:3)

Goodson and Walker also emphasize the essentially practical nature of storytelling in educational research.

Stories provide insights into the human condition that can only be glimpsed in the rear view mirror of regular research. Lawrence Stenhouse, one of the founders of qualitative approaches to curriculum research and development, suggested that even fictionalized accounts can carry greater force than quantitative research.

The novel relies heavily on that appeal to judgment which is appraisal of credibility in the light of the reader's experience. You cannot base much appeal to judgment on the statistics of survey; the portrayal relies almost entirely upon appeal to judgment. (Stenhouse, L. 1982: 24)

Bell (2002) points out that narrative research is based on the human need to impose meaning on what might otherwise be perceived as random experiences, and that we do this by imposing a story line on these experiences.

Pavlenko (2002) draws a distinction between Bell's approach and her own, which she calls narrative study. She suggests that while narrative inquiry represents an ethnographic approach to eliciting understanding, narrative study focuses on narrative construction from a variety of perspectives. She points out that narratives are highly specific to biographical variables such as race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, and that the audience for whom the narrative is constructed will also influence what gets told.

Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that narrative research ...refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters.

As Hardy (1968:5) attests, "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative."

The opportunity for learners to tell their own stories, and the control that they have over those stories, is empowering. It changes the learner's role within the research process. Learners are no longer individuals who have research done to them. They are collaborators in an ongoing, interpretive process.

Material and Method

Background

The first part of this paper, sought to locate the emergence of narrative as a research tool within the context of a learner-centred approach to curriculum research and development.

This research built on the work of Benson and Lor (1999). It aimed to look in detail at how learners conceptualize language and the language learning process. It also sought insights into how those perceptions change, and into what it is that triggers such change. Data were collected through structured interviews which resulted in a series of language learning histories. Students also completed the SILL learning strategies inventory (Oxford 1990).

The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the students' first language. Thirty-three of these were translated into English. The selection was made by the research assistants who rejected recordings for several reasons including poor sound quality, non-completion of the interview or uncooperative interviewees.

The overall principle governing the design of the interviews was that interviewees be encouraged to speak freely and provide as much data on their experiences as possible. Cantonese was selected for two main reasons.

The choice of the language to use in research of this kind raises complex issues that are rarely discussed in the literature (Goldstein, 1995).

The overall aim of the interviews was to guide interviewees through a process of reconstructing their experience of learning English.

Data analysis

The interviews were translated and transcribed. Once we had the transcribed interviews, which ran to several hundred pages, we had to decide what to do with them, as in their raw state, the sheer quantity of the data were overwhelming. Our initial approach was based on Kvale's (1996: 192) technique called *meaning condensation*.

Meaning condensation thus involves a reduction of large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations and results in condensed narratives histories that are subjected to further analysis. Procedurally, drew on Lieblich's holistic-content approach to the analysis of life history data, which has five steps as follows:

1. Read the material several times until a pattern emerges ... There are aspects of the life story to which you might wish to pay special attention, but their significance depends on the entire story and its contents. Such aspects are, for example, the opening of the story, or evaluations ... of the parts of the story that appear in the text.
2. Put your initial and global impressions of the case into writing.
3. Decide on special foci of content or themes that you want to follow in the story as it evolves from beginning to end.
4. Using colored markers ... mark the various themes in the story, reading separately and repeatedly for each one.
5. Follow each theme throughout the story and note your conclusion. Be aware of where a theme appears for the first and last times, the transitions between the themes, the context for each one, and their relative salience in the text. (Lieblich, 1998: 62-63)

Result

I have defined autonomy as the capacity to control one's own learning in terms of management, cognition and content. Management is related to time allocation, making plans, developing one's own learning contracts, etc.

Autonomy thus implies a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning.

Principally, autonomous learners are able to:

- self-determine the overall direction of their learning,
- become actively involved in the management of the learning process,
- exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities.

In this general sense, autonomy has been associated with constructivist and experiential theories of learning.

In making sense of learners' stories, I came to realize that their current attitudes to, beliefs about, and approaches to language learning represented particular moments in their lives as language learners, and that these were contextualized within interpretations of particular experiences of learning particular languages in particular social and educational contexts. Without knowing the context, it was difficult to ascribe deeper significance to the stories. I also found an interesting tension between the ideology of the school system and the evolution of our subjects as learners.

English is important to their academic success and future prospects in the world. This realization seems to be quite closely connected to the initiation of self-directed learning strategies. One informant reported to us "You only have to look up to learn English in Hong Kong." From the data, it seems that there is some kind of developmental process going on, and that self-direction is dependent on a certain conception of learning.

Although many definitions of autonomy in language learning make little or no reference to the specifics of second language acquisition (see, for example, Holec, 1981), some researchers have attempted to incorporate communicative assumptions within their descriptions of autonomy. Little (1991: 4),

This implies that the 'psychological relation' to the process and content of learning in question involves, at least in part, a communicative orientation towards the target language and the language learning task. (Little, 1997: p.99).

As teacher educators, my challenge is to convince teachers that I can learn a great deal from listening to our learners. I have to listen to what they don't say as well as to what they do say.

In the concluding chapter to our edited book on learners' stories, we drew three conclusions based on the studies presented:-

1. Language learning and attitudes towards language learning are unstable and change over time.
2. Learner difference is a complex construct that cannot be reduced to the influence of isolated variables.
3. The processes and goals of language learning are intimately interconnected with other aspects of individuals' lives.

This observation follows on from the second. While mainstream approaches to SLA tend to isolate psychological and social variables including motivation, affective factors, age, beliefs, strategies and identity (Ellis, 1994), the line of research presented here indicate that the factors are intimately intertwined, not just with each other, but also with learners' larger life circumstances and goals.

Further scope

As with much qualitative research, this study raises more questions than it answers. Some of the questions that occurred to me as I contested the data I had collected against related research and theory included"

What triggers what? Does the transition from viewing language as a subject to be studied to a view of language as a tool for communication lead to autonomy, or vice versa?

Is a communicative orientation a prerequisite for the development of autonomy

What are the implications of conflict between teacher and learner approach, beliefs and expectations?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced the emergence of narrative research within the context of a learner-centred approach to education. This tradition draws on data from and about learners in the form of narratives of learning histories for research and teaching. In the first part of the paper, I provided a selective account

of early work that gave learners a central role in curriculum research and development. I would like to conclude by suggesting that in addition to systematically collecting, analyzing and reflecting on the spoken and written language our learners produce at different stages in the learning process, I look BEHIND the language to the stories they have to tell. Such stories will help us to reconcile the gap that almost inevitably seems to exist between the researcher, the teacher and the learner. It will also provide me with insights into the complex relationships between planning, teaching and learning, a relationship that is neatly captured by Riley.

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