

LEARNER NARRATIVES IN RESEARCH AND TEACHING

David Nunan

Abstract

In the first part of this paper, we look at the use of learner narratives of their own language learning histories as a research genre. Although the use of narratives as a research tool has a long history in general education (Denny 1978), it has only recently gained momentum in language teaching (Benson and Nunan, 2005). The paper will look at the emergence of narrative as a research genre in the context of learner-centred curriculum development, as well as at the use of learners' stories in pedagogy and research. In the second part of the paper, we will illustrate the use of narrative as a research tool with reference to a large-scale, longitudinal study that was carried out at the University of Hong Kong.

Background: 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.

In a recent review of the harrowing film *United 93*, a narrative reconstruction of the hijacking and subsequent destruction of United Airlines flight 93 on 9/11/2001, the author Garner writes:

I have a rule of thumb for judging the value of a piece of art. Does it give me energy, or take energy away. When I staggered out of *United 93*, this rule had lost traction. I realised I had spent most of the screening crouching forward half out of my seat, with my hand clamped around my jaw. Something in me had been violently shifted off centre. ... I'm [left with] the same old haunting question: why do stories matter so terribly to us that we will offer ourselves up to, and later be grateful for an experience that we know is going to fill us with grief and despair? (Garner, 2006)

Our own interest in the use of learner narratives, both as a research tool and a means of providing learner input into curriculum development, grew out of applied research carried out by Nunan in the 1980s. This work aimed to place learners at the centre of the curriculum development process. 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. They found, for example, that good learners found their own, were creative and experimented with language, and found opportunities for activating their language outside of the classroom.

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. Despite some diversity, the responses were surprisingly homogeneous. Least helpful were teacher-centred lessons focused on grammar. Most helpful were exposure to authentic data, interactions with native speakers and opportunities to activate language outside the classroom. (Nunan (1991)

This research underlined the importance of incorporating learners’ views on the nature of language learning and teaching into the curriculum planning and implementation process. The only way to do that was to provide the space for the students to tell their own stories. 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.

From this early work which involved learners as collaborators and informants rather than ‘subjects’, interest grew in the use of learner narratives and biographies as research tools. Narratives or (auto)biographies focus on the description and analysis of social phenomena as they are experienced within the context of individual lives. 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. According to Chik, “The particular advantage of this method is the empowerment of the interviewees through highlighting the most important aspects of their life history.”

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 an attempt to employ ancient conceptualizations ... focused on directly observable referents. We now have Newtonians in educational research – no Einsteins – carrying on 4th decimal place ethnography before getting the rudimentary realities in place. This much I propose for general agreement: without good documentation, good storytelling, we’ll never get good educational

theory, which we desperately need. ... I claim story telling can contribute to our understanding of problems in education and teachers can help. Folks are forever calling for and proposing nifty solutions to problems never understood. 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.

Storytelling seems to offer a kind of intermediate technology of research adapted to the study of practical problems in realistic time scales without the prospect of ten years' initiation among dwindling (and probably best left) tribes of Primitives. (Goodson and Walker, 1982: 29)

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. In the following extract, he draws a contrast between quantitative survey research and fiction.

There is a need to capture in the presentation of the research the texture of reality which makes judgment possible for an audience. This cannot be achieved in the reduced, attenuated accounts of events which support quantification. The contrast is between the breakdown of questionnaire responses of 472 married women respondents who have had affairs with men other than their husbands and the novel *Madam Bovary*. 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. However, she makes the telling point that narrative inquiry is more than just telling stories. The narrative is the starting point. However, for the researcher, it is the point of departure rather than the destination. The researcher draws on the narrative to generate insights and assumptions about constructs and phenomena (such as motivation, identity, and anxiety) that are illustrated by the story. She goes on to point out that

Narrative inquiry involves working with people's consciously told stories, recognizing that these rest on deeper stories of which people are often unaware. Participants construct stories that support their interpretation of themselves, excluding experiences and events that undermine the identities they currently claim. Whether or not they believe the stories they tell is relatively unimportant because the inquiry goes beyond the specific stories to explore the assumptions inherent in the shaping of those stories. (Bell, 2002: 209)

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. Rather than viewing any given narrative account as a factual statement of past events, it is important to look behind the narrative and to "examine whose stories are being heard and why, and whose stories are still missing, being misunderstood, or being misinterpreted." (Pavlenko, 2002:216)

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. It can be the object of the research or a means for the study of another question. It may be used for comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality. (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber 1998: 2-3)

In this section, we have seen that while narrative inquiry is a healthy research tradition going back many years, in recent years, it has attracted the attention of researchers in applied linguistics and language education. Narratives enable people to construct a meaningful story about themselves over time. 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.

The study

Background

In the first part of this paper, we 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 was meant to be something more than a conventional literature review, although we hope that it provides a context for the rest of the paper in which we describe a longitudinal investigation based on learner narratives that was carried out by the authors at the University of Hong Kong.

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. The study was a naturalistic, hypothesis generating one involving fifty-nine first year undergraduate students from the Arts and Science faculties at the University of Hong

Kong. 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. While we made no attempt to arrive at a statistically valid stratified sample, we feel comfortable that the thirty-three transcribed interviews are broadly representative of students in the Arts and Science faculties in terms of gender, language proficiency, and learning strategy orientations.

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. Firstly, we felt that students would produce more data if they spoke in their first language. Secondly, we felt that they would speak more freely about their experiences to interviewers who were relatively close to them in age and experience. (Both interviewers were relatively recent graduates from the University of Hong Kong).

The choice of the language to use in research of this kind raises complex issues that are rarely discussed in the literature (Goldstein, 1995). While the decision to interview in Cantonese ruled out opportunities for discourse analysis, this loss is more than compensated for by the quality of the substantive data we obtained.

The overall aim of the interviews was to guide interviewees through a process of reconstructing their experience of learning English. What we wanted was the story of an "English language learning career". This led to a basic model for the interview in which the interviewees were prompted to describe their experiences of learning English at a particular stage of their lives and what they thought English and learning English 'were like' at that time. The interview concluded with several questions about current attitudes and approaches to 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 entails an abridgement of the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations. Long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words. Meaning condensation thus involves a reduction of large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations and results in condensed narrative histories that are subjected to further analysis. An example of one such condensed narrative can be found in the appendix to this paper.

Procedurally, we drew on Lieblich's holistic-content approach to the analysis of life history data, which has five steps as follows:

Source: Plenary presentation, TESOL Illinois Annual Convention, Chicago Illinois, March 2003.

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)

Outcomes

Gloria's narrative account, which we have reproduced in the appendix to the paper, illustrates one of the outcomes of our work: a fascinating, but puzzling relationship between the growth of autonomy (that is, our learners' attitudes and approaches to learning) and development of a 'communicative' orientation to language (that is, their conceptualization of language).

We 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. The cognitive domain relates to strategies, that is, being selective in terms of input, reflection, using metacognitive knowledge and so on. The final area is that of content – what it is that learners think that they're learning: is it memorizing a body of knowledge or developing communicative processes?

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. Within the field of language learning, autonomy also implies certain propositions concerning the importance of target language use, and in this sense it has been most closely associated with research that falls under the broad heading of 'communicative language teaching'. Our data suggests that, for language learners themselves, the development of autonomy is often closely associated with the development of a communicative orientation towards the target language.

In making sense of our learners' stories, we 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. We also found an interesting tension between the ideology of the school system and the evolution of our subjects as learners. The educational system in Hong Kong – at least the one that our students encountered – is predicated very much on a traditional 'transmission' model. In the early years of learning English, this is reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of the learners. However, at about midway through their secondary school, the students begin to report a change in their attitude towards the language they are learning and themselves as learners. They gradually become aware that English is a means of communication. This often takes the form of the realization that 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. (It is at this point that learners become aware of the opportunities for learning and using English outside of the classroom, and they report reading, listening to songs, watching movies and so on.) 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. So, while the school system remained rooted in a traditional 'transmission' mode that sees the function of education as preserving, adding to and transmitting knowledge and values – in a word, to preserve and transmit the dominant culture., the students themselves began to adopt an experiential approach to language development.

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), for example, argues that the capacity for autonomy presupposes that "the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning" and, in a later discussion of second language learning as a 'special case' for autonomy, he argues that:

[I]n order to achieve communicative proficiency learners in formal contexts must be required not simply to practise prefabricated dialogues and role plays, but to use the target language to articulate their own meanings in the fulfilment of communicative purposes that arise naturally in the course of the learning dialogue. The foreign language must be the medium as well as the content of learning. (Little, 1994: p.438)

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. In other words, autonomy in language learning is not merely a matter of control over learning activities and resources. It is also a matter of a particular orientation towards language learning, in which "for the truly autonomous learner, each occasion of language use is an occasion of language learning, and *vice versa*" (Little, 1997: p.99).

As teacher educators, our challenge is to convince teachers that we can learn a great deal from listening to our learners. We have to listen to what they don't say as well as to what they do say. We have to listen to the language they use as well as to the language they don't use. We have to notice the ways in which they transform the language data and learning experiences that we provide for them.

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.

Collecting data from informants over a prolonged period revealed that as learners accumulated experiences and developed their proficiency, their beliefs and attitudes changed. In other words, difference and diversity existed, not just between learners, but within learners at different stages of their language learning experience.

2. Learner difference is a complex construct that cannot be reduced to the influence of isolated variables.

The fact that learners are different and learn in different ways is something of a truism. Our research has demonstrated that 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 indicates that the factors are intimately intertwined, not just with each other, but also with learners' larger life circumstances and goals.

Further research

As with much qualitative research, this study raises more questions than it answers. Some of the questions that occurred to us as we contested the data we 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 insights can we gain from the psychological literature on attention? (As Bialystock (1990) has noted, unless you can control attention and select and process input, you won't learn much).

What are the implications of conflict between teacher and learner approach, beliefs and expectations? (We found an interesting reversal in our data. Rather than teachers seeing language as a tool for communication, and learners seeing it as a body of knowledge to be memorized, it is the learners who, by and large, come to see language as a tool for communication, and teachers as a subject to be studied.)

Conclusion

In this paper, we 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, we provided a selective account of early work that gave learners a central role in curriculum research and development. We 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, we 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 us with insights into the complex relationships between planning, teaching and learning, a relationship that is neatly captured by Riley.

A blind man has friends who talk to him about the world which they can see but which he cannot. Amongst the things that interest him most are what his friends call 'bubbles' ... Intrigued, the blind man asks his friends to make him some bubbles, which they do, but since he cannot see them he is obliged to try to touch them. But not only are they difficult to locate, when he does succeed in finding one, his touch destroys it. For him 'bubbles' will remain a matter of hearsay and a slight sensation of dampness on his fingertips. He simply does not have the appropriate tools for observing or experiencing the objects in question. Do we? That is, if we extrapolate from my analogy to our present area of interest, do we possess the methodological and conceptual tools which are appropriate to the study of autonomy, self-directed learning and self-access? Or are we teachers and researchers in this field condemned to stumble around like the blind, gesticulating wildly and destroying the very thing we want to understand? (Riley, 1996: 251)

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Appendix: A Condensed Narrative: The Case of Gloria

I first encountered English in kindergarten. I really don't remember if ever heard it before then. I remember that the first thing we learned was the alphabet – A,B,C, A is for apple, that kind of thing. It was nothing special, just one more subject. But I didn't think it was a very important subject.

I don't remember whether my primary school was supposed to be Chinese- or English-medium. I don't think it was ever said. All subjects were taught in Chinese, even English. The main focus of the lessons was vocabulary, and simple conversations. *Hello, I'm Gloria. Who are you?* - that sort of thing. I remember that it was pretty boring. We had a book, and had to follow along as the teacher read. Now and then, he'd ask us to spell words. Most of the time in primary school was spent copying stuff out. It didn't matter what the subject was. In English class, the teacher would give you a sentence and tell you to write it out several times.

I had no contact with English at all out of class, unless you consider doing English homework as contact. Extra-curricular activities after school were mainly sports. There was nothing in English.

When I got to years 5 and 6, I still didn't think that English was very important. We prepared for the Academic Aptitude Test, but the emphasis was on Chinese and Mathematics. We didn't have any special preparation for English or extra homework, so I didn't think that it was important. I remember that the focus in class was on grammar – memorizing tenses and that sort of thing.

After primary school, I went to an English-medium secondary school. In the beginning, what that meant was that for many subjects the textbook was in English. In class, the teachers spoke Chinese because their job was to make sure we understood, and the best way to do that was through Chinese.

Although we had a School English Society, my friends and I never thought of joining it on our own initiative. We thought more about what sports we would play when we joined the Sports Club. English wasn't an activity that you could use or have fun with, it was a subject that you had to study and learn.

When I started in high school, I had more contact with English because it was an English-medium school and the teacher more-or-less had to speak English. Then my view of English began to change. I began to see that in addition to being a subject to be studied, it could also be used as a tool to study other subjects. For example, I studied History, and classes were conducted in English, so English became more important. In most classes the teachers used a mixture of Cantonese and English – probably fifty-fifty. There was a lot of switching between languages. Some people say this is bad, but the main thing is that the teachers use language that we can understand. What's the point of teaching a perfect lesson in English if we can't understand? So, Chinese played an important part, even in English class.

In senior high school, the most important influence were the public examinations and preparing for them. English was now more important than other subjects because I needed it to learn the other subjects. Also, the English exams were different. In the past, you only had to know grammar and vocabulary, but now you needed a much deeper understanding because you were tested on listening and speaking. The public exams completely dominated my life because my future depended on getting good results, and getting good results required good English. Everything we did was based on the exams. What it tested, we learned!

But I also started to see the importance of English out of class. I realized that I needed the language if I wanted to communicate with other people. When I was young, it never occurred to me that I would talk with a foreigner in English. The teacher also stressed the importance of using English out of class. She encouraged us to watch English television and subscribe to English language newspapers. But I hardly ever did these things, I was too lazy. I couldn't see how they would help me pass the public examination. English was important because of the exams. Sometimes I would read a newspaper if it was required for an assignment, but that's all.

Then in form seven, I had an experience that changed my attitude. I took a summer job at Philips and because it was on Hong Kong Island, I came into contact with a lot of foreigners. I was the only one in the store who could speak much English at all, and it made me feel superior. But speaking with foreigners made me realize my deficiencies. I sometimes had to get them to repeat three or four times before I could understand. And I noticed that the English that foreigners spoke was different from the English that Chinese people spoke. This experience made me realize that I really did need to learn English more wholeheartedly, that I would have a need to communicate with other people one day and that English is really very important.

Now that I'm at university, I think of English in a very different way from when I was in school. I don't have the pressure of an English exam hanging over me, and I use English, not because I have to take an exam, but because it's the medium of communication. Many of my lecturers are foreigners, so if I talk to them I have to use English. You have to write, speak and think in English. It's part of daily life. Also, if you're good at English you feel superior, and other people look at you as though you're superior. One of the differences between English and other subjects such as Geography is that I don't look at people who are good at Geography as that smart, necessarily, but I think of someone who is fluent in English as very smart.