

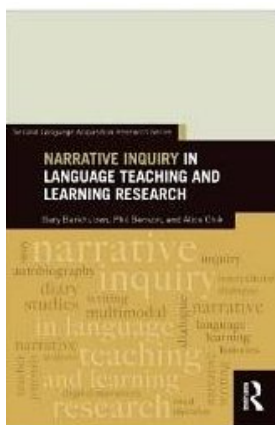
A Book Review: Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research

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Introduction

What are narratives? Narratives are typically personal accounts of connected events. People make meaning when they narrate stories to themselves and others. What is narrative inquiry? It is a qualitative research methodology involving: (1) stories as data, (2) storytelling as a data analysis tool, or (3) storytelling as a data presentation tool. It is the reviewers' observation that in Asia, quantitative research tends to predominate. The reviewers wish to encourage consideration of qualitative methods, such as narrative inquiry, perhaps as part of a mixed methods approach to research (Creswell & Clarke, 2007).

Narrative Inquiry in Language Teaching and Learning Research is best described as a manual for conducting and reporting narrative studies of language teaching and learning. This book, by three leading experts, is the first book on narrative inquiry methodology written specifically for those concerned with SLA. Authors Barkhuizen, Benson, and Chik draw concrete examples from more than 175 published studies and describe some of them in detail to demonstrate an array of techniques for narrative inquiry, including developing research questions and themes, data collection and analysis, and reporting research findings.

In this review, we will summarize what the authors say about the origins of narrative research and how to conduct and write up such research. Then, we will discuss what we see as some of the book's strengths and weakness, before urging readers to conduct their own narrative inquiries.

Origins of Narrative Inquiry and Conducting Narrative Research

Origins

Using narratives in research is not new, but interest in the collection and analysis of personal narratives has grown as part of the overall shift from the dominance of quantitative and experimental approaches to situated, qualitative, ecological, and interpretive perspectives. In the Introduction and Chapter 1, the authors summarize the notable paradigm shift in

research, which has led to increased interest in narrative inquiry. They label this heightened interest a “narrative turn” and explain advantages of narrative inquiry when investigating language learning and teaching.

The paradigm shift in research methods highlights concerns with self, identity, and individuality in the post-modern era. In the field of language teaching and learning, learners have begun to be recognized not simply as information processors but as people, with lived experiences and fluctuating emotions, who try to make sense of their L2 learning in their specific contexts over time. The authors persuasively argue that teachers’ and learners’ stories contribute to exploring these contemporary issues of self, identity, and individuality.

Conducting narrative research

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 cover three distinct forms of narrative data: oral, written, and multi-modal forms, respectively. Oral data are mostly collected through semi-structured or open interviews. Written data are mainly derived from either diaries, which represent introspective teaching and learning in progress, or language learning histories, which are retrospective. Teacher narratives, consisting of reflections on their teaching experiences, have so far formed the richest narrative research tradition. Some influential studies are catalogued in a table with columns of research aims, participants, teachers, content, and other data. This table displays some of the diverse agendas in narrative inquiry. The use of a “narrative frame,” a written story template with blank spaces for participants to fill in, is critically reviewed, and there is a thorough discussion of its strengths and shortcomings.

Multimodal data collection of texts with additional media types, such as images, sound, and video are extensively examined, with visual examples. Specifically, technology-enhanced formats (e.g., hyperlinks) are demonstrated to carry the potential to provide better understanding of how learners move on with the task of language learning. Here,

a concise checklist is presented that can guide novice researchers in conducting similar but unique studies.

Issues related to data analysis are explored in Chapter 5, which starts with a brief reference to a set of key qualities of qualitative research: it is iterative, emergent, and interpretive. This list of qualities is meaningful for the purpose of situating narrative inquiry in a broader perspective of qualitative methodology. The authors promote the examination of data through repeated readings to carefully craft an analysis, whether it is a thematic or discursive analysis. In thematic analysis, researchers look “at” the data and attempt to answer their research questions via identification and categorization of themes and subthemes. On the other hand, in discursive analysis, researchers look “through” the data to the structure and uses of language. This is possible, for example, by obtaining short, spoken narratives that occur in natural interaction. Researchers identify, analyze, and interpret the interactional features displayed in the spoken discourse. They focus more on how the learners negotiate meaning than on what they negotiate in the interaction.

In another useful discussion of data, the authors refer to two different approaches of narrative inquiry. Traditionally, narrative inquiry researchers have used stories, such as autobiographies and language learning histories, i.e., “big stories.” On the other hand, the authors also support the use of “small stories” (Bamberg, 2006), i.e., stories of everyday events, where the narrators position themselves in interactions with others in the learning context. The authors argue that this style of analysis is promising because identities emerge, or are constructed, in negotiation with others in the specific discourse. Especially in the field of language learning, learners are negotiating with their pre-existing identities and constructing new emerging L2 identities. Thus, this small story approach might be more appropriate in many cases.

Reporting Narrative Research

Indicative of the nature of narrative inquiry is the following claim: writing up the study is yet another analytical strategy because the act of writing, i.e., narrating, a story in a written form gives meaning to the data. This leads to what the book's last chapter discusses: reporting and discussing findings. The authors emphasize that narrative inquiry reports can be creative and innovative, yet still contain the components of conventional research reports in the social science studies. For instance, reports can be crafted to include poetry, story, and drama, i.e., in storied forms of researchers' creation. The authors invite readers to explore these and other unconventional ways of reporting.

Research reports in narrative inquiry start with the important variables of narrative reporting: the participant(s), researcher(s), and audience, on the one hand, and the topic and purpose of the research and the form of reporting on the other hand, and they demonstrate how interconnected these variables are in shaping the final report. The findings should be presented as coherently as possible and with sensitivity and care. In narrative inquiry, the researchers/writers are actively involved in representing the participants' experiences, yet at the same time, the researchers' own voice is more or less explicit when interpreting the data.

Every research report, even for a conventional social science study with quantitative data, is narrative in the sense that it is constructed and presented by the researchers to facilitate readers' understanding of what the research is about, its setting, methodology, and findings, as well as the researchers' interpretation of those findings. The report should construct a good story to serve this purpose, and a good story needs a well-organized structure of setting, plot, and resolution; otherwise, readers will not understand. A good literature review, for example, reads like the setting of a story to guide readers to the gap or research questions, i.e., the problem that the protagonists (the researchers and participants, indeed the entire SLA community of practice) confront and hope to overcome or at least understand. Due to the

narrative nature of all types of research reports, regardless of the research tradition from which they spring, this chapter's discussion of how to report research will benefit researchers generally, even those who employ experimental and statistical methodologies, as all researchers need to write a good story to engage their readers.

Another point to note in the chapter on reporting research is the authors' choice of the word, *reporters* for researchers/writers. Although the authors emphasize that research report can never be objective because they are "ultimately the product of the researchers' subjectivity" (p. 88), the word, *reporter*, suggests that researchers present the data and the findings as they are and underscores the researchers' neutrality. As to subjectivity, the authors address the criticism of narrative studies by some mainstream researchers who accuse narrative researchers of "cherry-picking" (p. 89) of data that support the researchers' arguments. Some people claim that anything goes in narrative tradition because everything is subjective, but the authors do not seem to agree. They write that narrative researchers can address the claims of cherry-picking by making their studies rigorous with careful, repeated readings of the data and well-crafted, systematic analysis.

Strengths and Weaknesses

In this section, we discuss what we view as strengths and weaknesses of the book, and we conclude by suggesting that readers may wish to conduct narrative research. Among the book's many strengths, readers may particularly appreciate the inclusion of numerous examples and ways of eliciting, analyzing, and reporting narrative data. Some key studies are presented in separate boxes along with good summaries and details.

The authors emphasize that there is no single correct way to do narrative inquiry, and they recommend that readers start a project and "feel" their way as they go along in search of better understanding of the inner worlds of language teachers and learners, who are creating meaning about their lives when they tell stories. The overarching theme is how to do good

narrative inquiry research in language teaching and learning, and the book also includes discussions of problems and ethical issues, which narrative researchers have to appropriately navigate.

On a less positive note, first of all, the same studies are referred to in more than one section, and those studies would be easier to access if a key study index was provided, especially because some authors appear more than once with different co-authors. Second, the introduction section serves both as an introduction and a conclusion. An independent conclusion section would have been appreciated, because concluding remarks before the main chapters may not make much sense to novice readers. Third, the authors discussed generalizability of the findings of narrative inquiry research, but the general understanding is that the hallmark of good qualitative studies is more about trustworthiness than generalizability, and readers might want a more thorough discussion of this controversial issue.

The field of SLA is evolving rapidly, and it is no surprise that this book came out at this time. The authors believe that now there is a “critical mass” (p. vi) of narrative research. We hope readers will develop the confidence and motivation to start their own narrative study with the help of the book’s guidance and this growing knowledge base.

References

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