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Narrative Inquiry in the Language Classroom: An Incubator of Identity and Growth Exploration

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Narrative Inquiry in the Language Classroom:
An Incubator of Identity and Growth Exploration

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Master of Arts in TESOL degree at
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Brattleboro, Vermont.

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Abstract

The paper examines narrative inquiry within the precepts of socio-cultural and ecological theories. The work touches upon constructivist learning ideologies and examines social approaches to learning with an emphasis on biographical narratives. The author makes a case for self-discovery, holistic learning, and creating collaborative learning environments. The study also presents a methodology with practical applications for implementing a narrative praxis in a second language learning environment.

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Descriptors

Class activities, classroom techniques, cultural enrichment, English (as a second language), experiential learning, instructional development, interlanguage, language teachers, literacy, pedagogical content knowledge, praxis, second language instruction, second language learning, student development, student experience, teaching methods.

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Narratives, or personal stories, are part of everyone's identity. They accompany us throughout our life journey. Narratives are kaleidoscopes of individual and collective experiences that become living history. They are windows to understanding self and others—*connectors* to the past, present and future. Narratives are “a primary act of mind” (Hardly, 1987, p. 1), and portals to other universes.

“Narrative inquiry” is a term that refers, in part, to narrative analysis. To a certain degree, it acts as a lens through which an experience can be examined. It also serves as a reflective tool for raising consciousness and distilling meaning. Narrative inquiry begins with a personal experience in the form of a told story. For narrative researchers, “the story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Rosiek, 2007, p. 4).

Narrative inquiry as a field of study has pollinated numerous disciplines. Beginning in the early twentieth century, narratology found application in literary analysis. Later, in the 1960s, it extended to psychology, sociology, cognitive science, qualitative research, the humanities and education (Riessman & Speedy, 2007, pp. 426-427). Each of these disciplines has employed narratives as a powerful tool to tap into the meaningful substance of human experience. Here, narratives exist “not only as the object of study, but also as the mode of study to illuminate experience, thought, consciousness and identities” (Schaafsma & Vinz, 2011, p. 24).

In the narrative field, the terms “narrative” and “story” can be used to frame different processes. Narrative has been defined “as a kind of discourse in which a precise time line is established through the telling, made up of discrete moments at which events take place” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 58). In other words, it is a series of related but not necessarily

continuous set of events. Story, conversely, “concerns specific events which occurred at specific times of narration” (Polanyi, 1982, p. 511). In this latter case, story refers to an isolated yet completed occurrence. However, not all narrative practitioners follow this delineation. In many cases, as in this work, the terms narrative and story are interchangeable. One other significant difference with regard to narrative is ‘context’—how the lived account is told, by whom and for what purpose, the conditions (time, place, audience, limitations, preconditions, learning objectives), method of delivery, version told, and backstory.

As defined in this paper, *narratives are vignettes of lived experience, personal stories that have deep and often unexplored meaning that connect people and facilitate learning.*

Within the field of language acquisition, narrative inquiry can serve as an effective student-centered approach to teaching. It is an alternative method to behavioristic models, i.e., direct translation, audio-lingual method, total physical response. Narrative inquiry was inspired, in part, by language educators and researchers like Madeline Ehrmann and Earl Stevick who advocated that a classroom is not just for conveying “content information” or pursuing strictly “language goals,” but also for attaining “deeper aims” and exploring “life goals” where language acquisition becomes a platform for “educating learners to live more satisfying lives” (Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 3).

For the author, narrative inquiry is an enriching process that leads to multifaceted learning. An ‘optimal’ education cannot be limited to a single subject or narrow discipline—it must also involve assisting learners in the discovery of their identity and with realizing a deeper significance in life, i.e., making meaningful connections between the subject material and the learners themselves. Meaning making in this paper refers to

repositioning of “self” and making sense of one’s life circumstances in identity formation and identity renegotiation. The other possible interpretation of meaning making in the sense of form: “meaning mapping,” a term used by applied linguists and grammarians, is beyond the scope of this study.

In the author’s opinion, narrative inquiry also stimulates interest and fosters receptivity. It facilitates exploration into very personal and consequential experiences where students (in the case of a language classroom) can organically employ the four skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In addition, learners often find the ongoing process ever fresh and profoundly enjoyable.

For teachers looking to expand their pedagogical “toolbox,” this paper will outline key elements of how to conduct narrative inquiry. It may also assist educators wanting to become more aware of the approach, especially in an environment where building a strong class culture that includes trust, openness, and receptivity play important roles. For instructors seeking new and different approaches to teach language, readers may gain greater insights into making classroom learning more relevant, meaningful, and durable.

While lived experience in the form of personal narratives occupies the basis of narrative inquiry, there are a plethora of narrative “types”—topics and themes—that can be used successfully in a language classroom. There are also various “mediums” through which they can take place. In this paper, the author will focus on biographical narratives. A discussion of fictional stories and other literary genres having application in a language acquisition context will not be included. For that, the reader may consult Wajnryb (2003), Collie and Slater (2008), and Lazar (2012). This paper also forgoes a detailed examination of methods and methodologies of conducting narrative inquiry research. Clandinin and

Connelly (2004), Pavlenko (2000), Riessman (1993), and Seldman (2006) have completed excellent studies in these areas and their work should be referred to for greater understanding of the mechanics, theory, and historical development of the process. Lastly, there are a number of corollary elements that support the application of the narrative process, such as communication techniques (i.e., active listening), pedagogical approaches (i.e., Socratic circles), instructional methodology (i.e., question framing), and other related areas that will not be discussed due to the limited scope of this paper. The focus of this study is on the theoretical framework and practice of narrative inquiry.

This work is based on three informational sources: first, the author's personal observations and practice of using narrative inquiry as an English language instructor in two university preparatory year programs in Saudi Arabia between 2009 and 2012; second, the author's personal insights gained while in a graduate degree program at the SIT Graduate Institute during the same period; third, the author's investigation, selection, and reference to relevant studies and leading writers in the narrative, educational, and socio-cultural fields including D. Jean Clandinin, F. Michael Connelly, Etienne Wenger, and Martin Cortazzi.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first section examines socio-cultural approaches and ecological processes of learning. It touches upon constructivist learning theories including those of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Dewey. It also delineates narrative tools that contribute to the formation of identity. Among the authors cited are Clandinin, Connelly, Bell, Giddens, Gibson, Horsdal, Kozulin, Lantolf, Neisser, Nelson, van Lier, and Woodward. The second section of the work is dedicated to developing a pedagogical

methodology and outlining its practice. It examines the fundamentals of conducting the approach in a college-level language class.

It is the author's intention to show that narrative inquiry can be a profound way of teaching and learning a language not only because it can develop essential language skills, but also raise awareness and change lives.

Narrative Inquiry as a Constructivist, Ecological, and Socio-Cultural Pedagogy

Social approaches to learning involve situated experience, social structures, practice, and theory of identity (Wenger, 2003, p. 13). The foundations of narrative inquiry are contained in constructivism. Constructivism postulates two key concepts: first, that learners construct new knowledge ("understanding") from what they already know; second, that learning is not a passive process of transmission, but one of active cognition (Hoover, 1996). This theory suggests that meaning making takes place through a succession of individual constructs "mediated by one's own prior knowledge and the experience of others" (Ryder, 2008, p. 249). The notion fits well with Piaget's theory on human development (Stage Development) that sees cognitive development as an adaptive process of assimilation, accommodation, and correction (Piaget, 1968). Dewey (2010) emphasized a similar process of exploration and use of reflection as a means of expanding—constructing and conditionalizing—knowledge through experiential learning. Like other constructivists, Dewey believed not only in "self-action" and observation as agencies to knowledge, but also "interaction" and "transaction" with environment as an important component of amplifying experience and facilitating greater learning (Dewey & Bentley, pp. 107-109).

Collaboration between learner and environment occupies an important role within social constructivism. According to Vygotsky, there exists a zone of potentiality (the “Zone of Proximal Development” or ZPD) that lies outside of what a learner can accomplish on his/her own, but within the boundary of what is latently attainable. Accessing the ZPD is possible through “collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 131). In a broader sense, cognitive growth is viewed as a mediated, social process that supports external dialog and environmental interaction, as well as “subterranean” or internal developmental processes that are stimulated by these external factors. Advancement is also determined by the “actual developmental level” of the learner (Vygotsky, p. 87). Accordingly, cognitive development is recognized as a transformational process where interpersonal and environmental factors activate and progress—“mediate”—through various stages of internalization.

“Affordance” is a term introduced by psychologist James Gibson to describe “action possibilities” (Gibson & Pick, 2000, p. 70) or potentialities that exist within an environment. These possibilities may or may not be recognizable by an individual. Nevertheless, they exist as relationships of possible action, insight, and development (Gibson, 1986, p. 295). The notion of affordance reveals a system of interactions that exemplify causal relationships. An important feature to point out with regard to this ecological constituent is what van Lier describes as a shifting of learning—from a reductionistic model to a developmental framework of *emergence* where:

...the perceptual and social activity of the learner, and particularly the verbal and nonverbal interaction in which the learner engages, are central to an understanding

of learning. In other words, they do not just facilitate learning, they *are* learning in a fundamental way. (van Lier, 2000, p. 246)

This perspective looks at “relations” rather than pure input objects. It uses as its focus learning gained through a multitude of opportunities or potentials existing concurrently in the learner’s environment. These relations are contextual and meaningful. They are cognitive and concrete, as well as subconscious and abstract. What this mean is that a language student can be afforded learning and growth opportunities within the ZPD that enable him/her to develop language skills, cultural-related information, as well as a cognitive awareness of self.

An ecological approach stipulates interaction—not only with other learners or knowledgeable others, but with aspects of, i.e., creating affordances with, the learner’s environment. These reciprocal actions and influences occur through a variety of processes and mediums. Cognition can be both representational (involving historical, cultural, and schematic elements) and ecological (action-based, emergent, and perceptual) (Neisser, 1992). An ecological theory presumes engagement and emersion in a rich, meaning-filled environment. As a practice of exploration and investigation, it looks for deeper meaning behind socio-linguistic forms and in relationship of self in the world.

When a learner is active and engaged with his/her environment, awareness of affective congenial properties and personal relationships within the environment emerge. Deeper understanding of these connections develops as opportunities are realized through interactions. The process leads to cognizance in the form of consciousness and knowledge acquired through lived experience (Lantolf, 2000, p. 255). Here, the components of language become less of a priority than the exchange and maturation of meaning, i.e.,

fluency in language application supersedes accuracy. Key to this process of affordance is perception and action that take place through a type of *negotiation*, a process that “facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (Long, 1996, pp. 451-452). The action of affordance allows the individual to develop his/her cognitive competencies in an ecological-based world of meaningful, contextualized relationships.

Narrative inquiry shares similar underpinnings with constructivism and socio-cultural theories of learning. The first commonality is that each bases its respective approach on personal experience. Constructivists believe that the nature of knowledge is complex, and that a learner builds new concepts and creates deeper meaning from previous knowledge, i.e., lived experience. From a socio-cultural point of view, individuals bring into the learning space personal experiences that can be shared, compared, and contrasted providing for wider and deeper understanding. In a narrative inquiry setting, the process of sharing and analyzing knowledge is directed towards a larger objective of learning and transformation.

The second commonality between these approaches is in the notion of temporality of knowledge. From a constructivist’s viewpoint, knowledge is ever changing. Through exposure and interaction with new information and ideas, knowing alters and becomes more complex. “Asking questions, encouraging research, and/or engaging students in inquiries designed to change current concepts” (Brooks, 1999, p. ix) is one response to this dynamism. From a socio-cultural perspective, knowledge is fluctuating and evolving through mediation with the help of a more knowledgeable guide. Mediation exists in two forms: as “human” and as “organizational” based (Kozulin, 2003, p. 17). In narrative

inquiry, the temporality of knowledge appears and refashions itself as renderings of the past, present, and future metamorphose with each new exposure and layer of interpretation. Classrooms, therefore, can become dynamic environments where knowledge expands and perspectives shift from moment to moment, and where students and their corpora of learning develop into greater and more highly evolved forms.

The third commonality between constructivist, socio-culture, and narrative approaches is the importance placed on the collaborative nature of learning. Constructivists believe that through an interactive and a collaborative environment, learners can gain meaning and multiple perspectives. In socio-cultural pedagogy, learners are free and encouraged to interact with anyone who possesses the skills and/or knowledge that will help to carry them into the ZPD. In narrative inquiry pedagogy, searching for meaning is guided through a series of “recursive”—an essential ingredient of the methodology—interactions with another interlocutor where the possibility of a richer, multicultural world emerges (this process will be outlined in detail in the second half of the work).

In this section of the paper, the author brought narrative inquiry, constructive theory and socio-cultural frameworks under the same umbrella. All three theories were seen to complement each other and provide a uniform base for learning. Narrative inquiry was shown to accentuate learners’ access to personal experiences that allow them to deeply internalize knowledge and more fully apprehend emotions. Constructivist methodologies examine, reflect on, and co-construct these experiences. Socio-cultural frameworks allow learners to journey into the ZPD where identity, self-consciousness, and other forms of psychosocial development take place.

Narrative and Identity

Narrative inquiry is known for its ability to unearth meaning within a collaborative and co-constructive context. One of the products of this process is a greater understanding of and appreciation for identity. Numerous researchers and narrative practitioners including Pavlenko (2002), Lantolf (2000), Miyahara (2010), Woodward (2003), and Giddens (2003) confirm that narrative inquiry is a distiller of self and a personal informant. One approach of taking a person through the transformative process from unknown to known is via a personal story—the process or meaning-making act of “telling” an experience—that allows a speaker to relive an event and gain new understanding. Meaning theory is one way to explain how people create sense and significance on their own: “this notion of meaning production has to do with our ability to ‘own’ meanings” (Wenger, 2003, p. 15). Meaning is also about “our (changing) ability—individually and collectively—to experience our life and the world as meaningful” (Wenger, 2003, p. 5).

Learners are multifaceted beings. Yet despite the variances, social psychology tells us that individuals form identifications with others sharing distinct and not dissimilar characteristics. This personal act of identification is “processual” and dynamic; within a larger context, it can be seen to be environmentally dependent and relational (Rummen, 1993, pp. 157-159). Narrative inquiry replicates this process by allowing learners to discover self, apprehend differences in others, and make connections in an engaging and interactive environment.

Within the field of narrative inquiry, identity studies have taken two discernible orientations: “one that examines learners’ identity construction through their interaction with others, and one that pursues it through oral or written auto/biographical accounts of

learners' experiences" (Miyahara, 2010). As such, narrative science pervades and illuminates the concept of self and identity.

It has been established that narratives are about an interplay of meaning making phenomena and a fundamental urge to understand the complexity of our experience: "Experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate self and others" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. xxv-xxvi). Narratives are full of personal meaning that can be manifested and distilled by the narrator through "telling" and reflection. They can also lead to insights for other collaborators participating in this process.

Discerning reality is a process of navigating the unknown and the journey of self that unfolds as a story. Understanding that story occurs as a narrative account where events are linked and personal experiences are reconstructed through discursive interaction. A narrative approach can also unearth important and unseen elements that contribute to identity construction—principles and embedded beliefs that the storyteller may not be aware (Bell, 1997, p. 127). Cognition of self and its relationship within the social environment is, therefore, firmly rooted in the unique socio-cultural context (Mead, 1967, p. 224), and identity is essentially relational and correlated with differentiation (Woodward, 2003, p. 12).

With the development of a more sociocultural orientation in language teaching, identity studies became both a heuristic teaching approach as well as a field of research. First, language is one of the strongest markers of identity. "The entire phenomenon of identity can be understood as a linguistic one" (Joseph, 2004, p. 12). This is because language is

“the place where our sense of ourselves, and subjectivity is constructed” (Weeden, 1987, p. 21). Language can also define a person’s origin, locality, education, and generation.

Second, individuals who are learning a new language while living in a country with native speakers of that language (English as a second language) are not only concerned with becoming proficient in the language, but are also faced with the reality of marginality¹, a transitional experience where facing trials and clashes of identity, i.e., cultural adaption, is inescapable. This transitional experience described by Bennett “is a loss of a familiar frame of reference in an intercultural encounter; or reshaping of values associated with rapid social innovation” (Bennett, 1998, p. 216). Even individuals who learn a new language in their home country (English as a foreign language) are brought into a new cultural space where they examine the language from a distant social context—where cultural and linguistic similarities and differences are often made part of the language learning process. Learning in these conditions can also bring about an examination of assumptions and attachments that cause shifts in thinking, create ambiguity and anxiety, displace learners and more—all while forming new perspectives and reshaping identity.

Lastly, language learning has become subject of greater scrutiny and cross-cultural demands on a worldwide level where the existing order and evolution of traditions together with the omnipresent struggle for national identity become, respectively, both suspect and fiercely defended as borders disappear and distant domains draw nearer. Even future events can impact the interpretations of past experiences. “Amid the centrifugal and centripetal pulls of globalization, the construction of self-identity becomes dauntingly difficult” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 46). This melee with innumerable and

contradictory voices rising like sirens, where people try to make sense of themselves and others, does not prevent individuals from forging a self-identity:

The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse. This process is made more complex by the fact that a variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality). (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 348)

It is precisely this 'sense making' that gives rise to identity. Consequently, "self-identity has to be created and recreated on a more active basis than before" (Giddens, 2002, p. 47). Understanding one's identity, therefore, is not only a key component of living in a contemporary world where personal biography, gender, ethnicity, age, nationality, social class, and other culture categories and labels come under fire, but also a catalyst to the formation and transformation of one's hopes, desires, feelings, and sense of self through interactions and internalization. In a world challenged by differentiation and growing forms of mediation, i.e., technological advances, multimedia constructs, and social networking, "A person's identity has in large part to be discovered, constructed, and actively sustained" (Giddens, 1994, p. 82). Once understood, it becomes possible to recognize and apprehend one's uniqueness in relation to others.

Narrative inquiry has been shown to be a powerful tool in apprehending meaning of one's life experience. Such a profound level of comprehension can lead to personal

transformation of narrator and listener alike. In this section, it was discussed how changes and shifts can appear as new perspectives, increased knowledge, fresh and first experiences, shared explorations, questions, contradictions, and confirmations that can lead to learning and identity formation. Having examined the theoretical footings and more general motivations of narrative inquiry, our investigation will now focus on the application of narrative as a teaching approach in a language-learning classroom.

Methodology and Practice

The focus of this section is to provide an overview of the operations and practical methods of executing narrative inquiry in an instructional setting followed by a short tailpiece on its implementation in a second language classroom. This study will look at four key areas: narrative frameworks, topics and themes, the importance of biographies, and the development of language skills in a narrative context.

Narratives can take many forms. Regardless of context and method implementation, narrative inquiry as a discipline and teaching approach consistently focuses on meaning making. Narratives are also invariably based on lived experience; in most cases, the *sharing* of that life experience.

Narrative inquiry uses discrete—yet often systematic and conditionally sequenced—activities to obtain qualitative as well as quantitative knowledge. But the action and undertaking of narrative inquiry is not limited to or characterized solely as a fact-finding mission. The *process* of narrative inquiry transpires as a “spiraling” activity that is moving, progressing, and expanding. Its operations are permeated with mindfulness, stimulus, and an unfolding of self seeking relation to the world. Inherent to its practice is a learner’s

ability to acquire a skill—through discovery, analysis, critical thinking, and change—of meaning making. At the same time, a learner must also make intrapersonal and interpersonal connections, create relationships, interact, adapt, and awaken. Clifford Geertz, in his ethnographical research focusing on cultural theory, adopted a proposition concerning episodes of meaning within which people live out their lives:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz, 1975, p. 5)

This is the essence of the narrative process. When combined with language learning, it can be an engaging, motivating, and powerful tool to not only investigate students' micro-histories and incite interest in learning a new language, but also to develop fluency as well as accuracy in the target language.

Examined below is a framework of essential procedures part of an umbrella-type of teaching approach.

Narrative Frameworks

It was mentioned earlier that narrative inquiry as a teaching approach is a methodology that follows a prescribed sequence of activities dependent upon a variety of circumstantial factors. These situational considerations are many, and can range from instructional context to curriculum aim, from teacher experience to student motivation. There is also an assortment of tools and mediums (i.e., reflective writing, journaling, jotting, diary accounts, interviewing, group work, photos and other artifacts, multimedia creation, etc.) that can be used to facilitate the practice (an obvious advantage of the process is that a participant

simply needs to capture a narrative: any simple recording device such as a pen and sheet of paper will do). Consequently, developing a blueprint that fits all practitioners is much akin to creating a shoe that fits all sizes and shapes of feet. There is no single way to facilitate narrative inquiry; in fact, there are a multitude of approaches that can produce excellent results. For the purposes of this study, however, what can be constructed is a model directed towards second language learning and built around a conventional instructional context for college-level learners.

Based on the work of John Dewey (1997), Jean Piaget (1950), and more recently David A. Kolb (1984), the author has elected to use a model based on the ORID method developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs and later propagated by educational theorist Laura J. Spencer (Spencer, 1989) referred to as the Focused Conversation Method. The approach allows a teacher or facilitator to lead a group through four prescribed and associated stages of cognitive thought. Its undertaking is meant to extend thinking and learning capacity, make learning meaningful, facilitate group interaction, help prevent and solve problems, strengthen and deepen communication, as well as provide participants with “a logical framework to structure their own thinking” (Nelson, 2001).

The four stages of the process are:

1. Objective: directly discernible data and sensory observations.
2. Reflective: personal reactions (emotions) and associations (images).
3. Interpretive: making sense by articulating meaning, significance, and implications.
4. Decisional: finding resolution.

Collectively, these stages form a step-by-step sequence that has the possibility to abstract meaning and access higher level thinking while bringing out different strengths and learning abilities of students. As a result, a greater number are encouraged to participate in the process. Another benefit achieved by methodically structuring this experiential-based exercise is that topics are covered in a shorter period of time and solutions to language-related problems can be found more quickly. Class interactions also become more student friendly, and both teachers and peers form more collaborative relationships with student members.

A procedural outline for carrying out narrative inquiry could look like the following:

Step One: Activation. Students are made to feel comfortable, to become open and engaged. Activation is critical for “authentic” interaction to take place allowing for humanistic and purposeful communication. This step is a ‘warm up’ period for activities that are to follow. A teacher needs to ask questions and get answers. He/she must obtain a clear reading of the “climate” and potential involvement of students—both individually and as a group. Questioning does not need to be deeply meaningful or even related to the day’s teaching aim; it must, however, reel in students to a common time (“now”) and place (“this classroom”). This step serves as an act of reaching out, making contact, and affecting personal interaction.

Step Two: Examination. Students are given a task question with clear instructions on how to respond and carry out the exercise. Typically, the teacher will conduct a prewriting exchange by introducing the topic and asking students to respond as a group: “What do we know about X?” Responses can be recorded on the board. This is not a time for analysis—that comes later. The teacher should ask guiding questions that get all participants

'personally' engaged with the material, and conclude by having students make emotional connections. Again, the activity is one of identifying, not analyzing. Step two serves both as an introduction of the talking point as well as a dry run through the material that gives each student a sampling of what is to come.

Step Three: Exploration. Students are given the space and framework to immerse themselves into the topic. Formal constraints, such as a minimum number of pages/words, validated structure types, and approved forms of expression are to be mitigated or eliminated completely from the logistics of the assignment. Students should be given creative license to retrieve, discover, familiarize, investigate, and scrutinize the subject matter and their relationship with it. This step is an individual activity that takes the student within him/herself and allows him/her to make rational as well as emotionally grounded connections with the topic.

Step Four: Reflection. Students, under the direction of the instructor, revisit the material and are guided through a more in-depth analysis. Focused, clarifying questions are put forth that are to cause students to reconsider their earlier explorative responses and begin to make deeper connections, such as, "What does it mean for you?" or "What if...?" This step may transpire in two stages: first, as a pair or small group activity followed by a comprehensive class sharing as a whole. More than just a review of ideas, this step is to elicit a response and encourage perspectives outside the framework of a student's first narrative reply while expanding and deepening meaning (and as will be shown later, as insights into workings of the target language).

Step Five: Revisitation. Students are asked, again, to go internally. This time, to rethink, revise, and reassess their position. At this juncture, they have already examined their

feelings and ostensibly mulled over contextual and practical considerations. An important moment during this step is the crystalizing and summarizing activity that has students highlight and capture ‘meaning’—their relationship with the issue—in a single word or short phrase. Time should be limited during this step. Students need to be gently pushed into coming up with “an answer” readily and spontaneously with minimal time. This step is about recoding—translating and making sense of reworked deliberations.

Step Six: Realization. This final, recursive step brings the student back to the community of meaning seekers. Each is asked to share his/her “jewel.” It is a moment of acceptance, understanding, appreciation, and fulfillment. The student realizes that he/she has come full circle. In many cases, deeper personal meaning is realized. The student’s labors have produced something material. There is a feeling of satisfaction, vitality, and a stronger sense of identity. Students often experience a boost in self-esteem. Normally, the teacher will finish with a final question calling for students to link their wisdom to a present or future action. This prompt can be very powerful. Step six, the final step in the series, is about growth, self-learning, and personal fulfillment.

This process takes students through a cycle of description, interpretation, meaning making, and call for action. The exercise begins with a concrete experience. It then moves to an individual’s impression of that experience. Lastly, an attempt is made to substantiate worth and find action-based application. As a tool, this model can serve as an effective means to analyze problems, understand emotions, determine potential implications, and make intelligent decisions as part of a socio-cultural framework.

Topics and Themes

Within the narrative practice, the range of questions that can be put forward is virtually limitless. Naturally, the selection of topics and catalog of overriding themes should reflect the context and individual needs of learners. A shortlist of the author's preferred topics and themes is below:

- a. *The Story of My Name*: Particularly powerful in the author's current context (Saudi Arabia) and in cultures where names carry concrete meaning. Facilitating this approach can begin by going around the room and asking students to tell their story. "Why were you given your name?", "How did the selection process unfold?", or "What is the story behind your name?" are questions that can act as an instigating force that leads learners to the reasons behind decisions that constitute an indivisible part of their identity. Quite often, participants will start smiling, talking about people they love, or sharing something intimate about their nature. Like many of the themes listed below, the narrative process can include preparatory work outside of class in the form of casual or formal research. A variation of this theme is to have students share a "nickname" popular among friends or family. This topic is a wonderful jumping off point early in the study program. It can transpire as a relatively short exercise, be friendly and personal, yet contain the potential to activate memories and raise deeper emotions. As with many of the topics and themes listed below, it is important to mention from the outset that the teacher become a member of the learning community and participate in the sharing process in order to create a unified, homogeneous organism on a central mission.

- b. *A Decision That Changed My Life*: A compelling topic that examines motivation, action, and the aftermath of an often far-reaching decision that was made by the learner (or made for him/her) and its consequences.
- c. *My English Journey*: Both a reconstructive and contextual referencing of historical, social, and motivational artifacts and appreciations. In addition to ordered and developmental elements, students analyze longer trajectories of growth and maturation, and look at factors that have made them successful—or not—in their language learning practice. It also encourages qualitative observations of what made the learning process easy and/or difficult.
- d. *The Journey of My Education*: An autobiographical approach that focuses on the guiding rationale and personal direction a learner is pursuing and will take in his/her future education.
- e. *The Story of My Life*: Autobiographies have proven to be some of the more cogent themes in the author's narrative inquiry practice (more on this subject will be discussed later in this section). They introduce timelines and naturally compel students to be cognizant of relationships and ecological affordance. Having students take on *The Story of My Life* involves considerable time and is best geared for more advanced narrative practitioners.
- f. *An Unforgettable Moment*: One of the most accessible and 'performable' topics. It is emotionally rich, cross-cultural, and viable within a variety of contexts.
- g. *My Favorite Picture*: An advanced form of narrative inquiry that brings in image-based elements charged with meaning and semiotic messages. More than just a variation of

‘show and tell,’ this topic can make for more intimate and involving interaction with other members of the class.

- h. *The Most Important Event in My Life*: Plausibly, together with the topic that follows, the most consistently effective question explored by learners in the author’s classroom. This subject not only naturally disposes students to focus on dominant areas of their lives, but also drives them to critical events that lead to pivotal intersections and prime pathways of living and personal passion.
- i. *Describe a Time in Your Life When You Felt Powerful, Confident, and Alive*: This is the author’s personal favorite. Learners are naturally activated and uniformly find momentum from start to finish. There is a consistency in results with an often rich diversity in perspectives. More than any other topic, students reach an apex of understanding and self-identification. The process unfurls into a defining moment that the author describes as “finding the jewel”—an apogee that manifests as a clear and meaningful expression of the essence of a story. It can take the form of a message, lesson, moral, principle, or motivational invention.
- j. *My First Memory of Myself*: Students are regressed back to their earliest cognitive moments of thought, experience, and sensation. Events can be recollected on one’s own, or recalled vicariously through a close, knowledgeable other. Narrative researcher Marianne Horsdal refers to this action as “episodic memory” (Horsdal, 2011, p. 49).
- k. *The Hero’s Journey*: The “grand narrative” or monomyth. Established on the progressive patterns and passage of events found in classic myths and in many narratives of people from around the world, this theme, espoused and described at

length by Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1949), looks deep into our primordial motives, worldly ambitions, life lessons learned, metaphysical worldviews, modes of survival, resistance to change, call to service, and how we meet tasks and confront challenges. Its focal point: being and becoming. One way to approach this theme is to incorporate myths that trace transformation and growth that parallel students' life journeys where "In any transformation of identity the knows include endings and a sense of loss, anxiety about stepping into the unknown, uncertainty of the territory ahead, and joy of reaching the rebirth stage" (Miller, Cassie, & Drake, 2010, p. 44). The teacher may begin with a discussion of a mythological hero who goes through a personal journey filled with meaningful hurdles and resulting life lessons learned. Next, the teacher can point out similarities real people face and draw connections to learners. This can be a very relevant approach for a group of learners who are immigrants or are going through a "transitional experience." The Hero's Journey is one the most telling and influential approaches within narrative inquiry that centers on self and identity.

1. *Circle of Life*: A more ethnographical centered subject than The Hero's Journey where discussions focus on rites of passage and other cultural milestones including birth, puberty, coming of age, marriage, death, and rebirth. Here, a teacher can call attention to the reality that all cultures have 'crucial' stages in life that are marked with ceremony and initiation. Participants can be asked to identify the turning points (and the associated value and belief systems) that are celebrated in their native culture, relevant social hierarchies, as well as what stage they are currently in. Students can also craft linear timelines depicting key events.

In preparation for carrying out what fundamentally is a formidable process, familiarizing students with the theoretical underpinnings, models, and other metacognitive elements necessary for understanding the narrative process as well as fully applying themselves within the practice can prove extremely beneficial. “Metamotivational” (Gobel, 1970, p. 62) elements can help participants navigate through the complex series of activities that are regulating, ever changing, and necessitating adaptation. In addition, instruction of the metacognitive features of a narrative praxis “will reinforce the overall understanding of ecological interaction, coalesce the practice of both approach and course content, as well as serve to model patterns of affordance” (Culver, 2012).

Autobiographical “Me”

Very often, people spend more time reading about and studying other people’s lives, and they neglect to examine and reflect on their own lives. For a teacher, there is an opportunity to facilitate an inward journey into a student’s personal life through the writing and telling of his/her autobiography. In the author’s experience, she has observed that this is often the first time a learner has ‘formally’ explored him/herself.

As discussed prior, autobiographies are powerful literary forms. They not only reveal historically significant moments of a person’s life, but also bring the narrator closer to the world of motivations, reasoning, and emotions. Autobiographical narratives can examine significant events and turning points in a person’s life, as well as explore ancestry, social heritage, and genealogical characteristics—“position” attributes. Autobiographies also examine factors of “will,” for example, when a person makes a conscious decision to change his or her life by getting married, leaving a country, or entering into a career.

Autobiographies investigate a category of “transitional experiences” that change a person’s

physical and emotional worlds. For instance, an accident, a promotion, a death or a birth. In short, autobiographies are rich and meaningful material for investigation.

There are numerous advantages to using a biographical approach. In addition to creating awareness and building identity, related activities can strengthen learners' relationships with their family members, and assist in positioning participants for the future by analyzing their past:

The more we reflect on our path and our past, the reflections that we go through tend to consolidate, validate, and/or strengthen our qualitative judgment or values that then become norms. They then help to shape cognitive bias that we carry forward into evaluating the present with respect of choosing a path in the future.
(Long, 2009)

Biographies often supply the core impetus for narrative inquiry: they help us make meaning of life. They are the model scheme where students can pursue a variety of disparate but not disconnected socio-cultural topics. Within this archetype, a student can realize that he/she is not in a vacuum. Biographies also serve as historically significant cultural pieces, as a record of humanity. They hold significant personal, community (including classroom), and epistemological value—a crossroads of wisdom and experience.

Sometimes, autobiographical themes (like other narrative themes) require guided introduction and activation. One way to carry this out is through narrative frames, a common tool used in narrative inquiry. Their purpose is to simplify the process and keep participants on task. For language learners, frames not only give direction to a story, but also offer linguistic patterns:

A narrative frame is a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths. It is structured as a story in skeletal form. The aim is for participants to produce a coherent story by filling in the spaces according to their own experiences and their reflections on these in the process of narrative knowledge. Frames provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written. (Barkhuizen, 2011, pp. 12-13)

There are a number of methodologies available and practiced in narrative inquiry. Some researchers and practitioners focus on critical moments, or life turns. Some educators employ journaling and reflective writing. Other narrative practitioners are interested in the autobiographical self and exploration of longitudinal experiences. All of these approaches can lead to meaning making, learning, and the process of constructing identity.

Narrative Inquiry and the Development of Language Skills

In many ways, narrative inquiry exemplifies a student-centered approach to teaching built on heuristic and experiential learning practices. While structured and methodical, it often emerges in a more fluid and unpremeditated manner than prepackaged curriculum that tends to exhibit a more routine pace and set of predictable patterns. Because of its constructive, meaning making quality, narrative inquiry is powerfully liberating. Neo-Vygotskian socio-linguistic theorists uniformly note that, without a connection to student lives, curriculum becomes less relevant and learning less motivating (Moll & Greenberg, 2003).

In a language class, narrative inquiry serves as a catalyst for genuine communication and development of the four skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Employing a

personal story instead of a textbook invites active participation. The heroes of the conversation are real individuals, and they are in the classroom. With narrative inquiry, students have the opportunity to not only hear a story, but to also interact with its author.

Narrative inquiry also invites more opportunities for negotiating meaning and receiving comprehensible input:

Krashen's work in language acquisition notes that canned curriculum, rigid recitation, and constant correction do little to promote bona fide learning. Rather, acquiring a second language can best take place in the same manner as the original acquisition of the Mother Tongue. A child learns his/her original language in a natural progression, rather than through an artificially constructed environment. The result is an expansion of one's lexicon through trial and error, whereupon "gains" far outweigh grammatical or pronunciation errors. As a result, each language learner develops without the debilitating effects of criticism or deficit-based modeling on the part of any given instructor, whether the teacher is a parent or professional instructor. This process is more in keeping with "whole language" practice, rather than the dissection of language acquisition into artificially conceived segments... If the desired goal is to produce an "independent learner," the instructor must recognize that the student is more than an "empty vessel" to be filled with information. (Anderson, 2010, pp. 22-23)

As learners put down their stories onto paper, they automatically become readers. Brian Cambourne calls it "communication with the sane nervous system." He asserts that:

When writers read their own writing, not only do they communicate meaning to themselves, but also they discover how to order their thinking and their words. The process of constantly rereading one's own text also has far-reaching effects on the way one reads, and ultimately on the range of different textual forms that one comes to control. (Cambourne, 1988)

Writing enhances a language learner's ability to read a text accurately, fluently, and with comprehension. It is one of the many benefits of using a narrative inquiry approach.

Another example illustrating the constructive use of the method in developing reading and writing skills is through the Language Experience Approach. This practice uses students' existing language and life experiences to develop reading, writing, as well as listening and speaking skills in an "open learning" environment where independent, self-determined, and interest-guided learning can take place. Essentially, after a topic is selected, a student volunteer "dictates" a response to the teacher. The teacher then records the student's narration as prescribed by the student on the board where all can see the exposition in written form. The teacher can guide, and if necessary, help co-construct the narrative. Other students can also participate and help to select vocabulary, provide grammatical points, and ask clarifying questions. After the teacher records the account, he/she then reads the text in its entirety to the class. The pragmatics of this approach is that learners have heard the story, possibly participated in it, and read it. At this point, the teacher could ask students to, "Summarize your experience in one sentence." This step can lead learners to a distillation of the experience into a single, meaningful idea. The teacher may also choose to bring attention to grammatical elements, punctuation, spelling, and new

vocabulary. Additionally, the narration can be memorialized in some way (posted to a wall, made into a handout, photographed and put online) and used for future reference. The ongoing collaboration between narrator, student peers, and teacher can generate insightful dialog and stimulate productive language study.

Other narrative-relative pedagogical techniques that can be employed in a language-learning classroom include predicting, inferring, monitoring, clarifying, responding, and evaluating processes (Hegelson, 2003).

Lastly, narrative inquiry fosters collaborative knowledge-building dialog that promotes language learning. In performing collaborative activities, learners notice, hypothesize, and test their interlanguage². For example, if they are not confident about a grammar point, they are still likely to engage in knowledge-building dialog. What is significant is that learners have an opportunity to notice their knowledge gaps which leads to awareness and metalinguistic knowledge (Swain, 2001). This process makes application of the four skills in a language learning classroom enjoyable, purposeful, and more compelling.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to demonstrate that narrative inquiry can be a powerful tool in raising awareness, forming identity, and developing essential language skills. The author would like to believe that, in many ways, this intention was realized.

The first half of the work examined narrative inquiry within the context of constructivist, ecological, and socio-cultural pedagogies. The author discussed the significance of lived experience and need for collaboration between learner and environment. Relevant learning theories were discussed. The concept of relational affordance—of actualizing

environmental potentialities through interaction—was introduced. These elements were brought together and used to validate how affective learning and insight will follow. In addition to shaping new concepts and creating deeper meaning, it was stressed how sharing and analyzing information can lead to transformational leaps in knowledge, self-discovery, and understanding. Additionally, narrative inquiry was shown to be an effective means of engagement, of responding to dynamic and evolving contexts, of adapting and refashioning self for greater growth—all within a highly collaborative environment.

Narrative inquiry was also corroborated as being an excellent tool for distiller of self. Through personal stories, learners are able to unearth meaning by retelling and reliving past experience. Narratives create significance: “Stories lived and told educate self and others.” Narratives can also help students frame and focus events, face trials, and cope with transitional experiences. The narrative process makes us more critical thinkers and better able to analyze new cultural spaces and learning contexts. It can lessen ambiguities and anxiety, and provide a working framework for living and learning.

The second half of the paper focused on the more practical applications of the approach. It provided an overview of key methodologies of carrying out narrative inquiry in an instructional setting. This section looked at narrative frameworks and presented a step-by-step process of implementing the method. The procedure was explained as systematic, recursive, and cumulative. It took the reader through key stages that included encounters with the world, internal experiences, interpretations, and resolutions. In addition, a number of popular narrative topics and themes were discussed highlighting biographical narratives and their capabilities. Instilling metacognitive understanding into the practice was also recommended. The paper concluded with an overview of the applications of the

method in a second language-learning classroom. Narrative inquiry was shown to be a strong motivational force and effective methodology in learning the four skills.

The significance of the study is its multifaceted theoretical framework that comprehensively encapsulates the narrative approach. With growing interest in the subject, this paper can serve as a useful primer to those looking to gain a fundamental understanding of its philosophy and rudimentary underpinnings. The work also presents a practical framework outlining the essential operations in carrying out a narrative exercise that can be employed and later adapted by second language teachers.

The investigation underlines the idea that making sense of personal experiences provides a useful foundation and direction for more conscious living. It accentuates how sharing personal stories is a way to achieve interconnectedness, and subsequently, bring out the qualities of tolerance, kindness, and goodness. In the classroom, the approach inherently provides direction and support to learners. Narrative inquiry is a life giving experience.

The assignment was not conceived as an all-inclusive research study of narrative inquiry. Within the work, the author would have liked to expand the teaching methodology section and provide greater detail with additional examples of facilitating the method in a language-learning context. It is the author's opinion that the work would have also benefited from the inclusion of a list of preplanning and implementation protocols along with recommendations to address specific teaching-related challenges in the classroom. In addition, a short account of instructor as well as student observations and responses could prove useful to the reader.

The narrative has existed since the beginning of time. “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” are primordial questions. Narratives conjure a deep connection with myth, our reason for being, and our connection with the world. Narrative inquiry is a simple and, at the same time, profound teaching tool. Advances in cognitive, socio-emotional, and psycho-social forms of interactive education continue to propel narrative inquiry as a critical element in each students’ process of self-discovery. As a pedagogical approach, interactive and personalized modes of dialog appear critical to the sense-making process, *en route* to heightened forms of (second) language proficiency.

Footnotes

¹ Marginality is inversely related to intercultural competence. Marginality occurs when a person's adaptive capabilities fail to support effective interaction in an unfamiliar cultural context. Marginality occurs when a person lacks the means to appropriately respond to a socio-environmental situation that presents different value and belief systems, as well as complex and abstract culturally divergent interactions. Common responses include denial, isolation, and separation. Adaptation is the process of responding to and overcoming these challenges through an array of affective, cognitive, and behavioral skills.

² Interlanguage is an attempt by a second language learner—who is not fully proficient in the target language—to communicate with limited proficiency. In order to convey meaning, the learner will “approximate”—borrow patterns from their native language, extend patterns from the target language, or create innovations using words and grammar that are already known.

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