

Narrative Knowledging: An Analysis of Narrative Inquiry for Expanding the Knowledge Base of the TESOL Community

Ryan W. SMITHERS

Within the TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) community, there have been calls for a re-evaluation of research paradigms to help make the theoretical knowledge base of second and foreign language education more applicable to TESOL practitioners (Stewart, 2006). More specifically, there is demand for more access to the tacit knowledge that TESOL practitioners' possess. As a result, narrative inquiry has enjoyed a surge in popularity as of late, but has been struggling to become a valid and universally accepted research paradigm. Accordingly, this paper considers this paradigm in light of a case study by Cadman and Brown (2011), and reveals how diverse, yet tenable this method is for practitioner-researchers to inquire into practice and share what they know.

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of applied linguistics today, narrative inquiry is enjoying a surge in popularity as a qualitative research methodology. In fact, a turning to narratives in the social sciences coincided with the decline of positivist perspectives on how research should be conducted at the end of the last century (Clandinin, 2006). Evidence of this turning to narratives is especially evident in the literature in applied linguistics. Barkhuizen (2013) declares that the increase in narrative studies and inquiries that examine the validity of using narratives as a research methodology in this field have been explosive since the turn of the century. Yet, despite all this popularity, matters related to the purpose, methods, ethics, and validity of narrative research are hotly contested between formalists and narrative inquirers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). The reasons for this discord are deeply rooted in tradition, which means that fundamental beliefs about what constitutes a valid inquiry of phenomena lay at the heart of this debate. Accordingly, consensus over the merits of narrative inquiry as a valid research method may never be reached.

In essence, there are two main points of contention: theory and people. In regards to theory, formalists are pedants, and as such, they firmly believe that studies begin with theory. To them, theory needs to be developed in a way that allows for determinate conclusions to be made about phenomena. In contrast, narrative theorists begin with experience. They make life events reflect theory and then allow readers a chance to make their own conclusions about the applicability of

the phenomena being studied. In regards to the second point of contention mentioned above, people, formalists have strong convictions. To them, people are to be examined as examples of categories (i.e. culture, race, class, etc.), not as lived stories that are the embodiment of human emotions as found in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Further to this, it can be said that formalists also view researchers in the same light, as nondescript representations of a formalist category. Narrative theorists, on the other hand, recognize that researchers have their own lived stories. Accordingly, these lived stories contain a unique history of inquiry that necessitates that researchers be sensitive to how their own biases or preconceptions about inquiry could create conflict during research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In sum, the crux of the debate between formalists and narrative theorists is over what are actually epistemological, ideological, and ontological differences is an unending debate that all established research methodologies have and continue to experience. In many ways, it is a refining process that helps to uncover the true value of a method. Subsequently, it is imperative that narrative inquiry undergoes further and more intense scrutiny so that its true worth can be discovered. As a result, it is the purpose of this paper to briefly look at the theory and practice of this research method in light of a case study by Cadman and Brown (2011) to determine the strengths and weakness of narrative inquiry for teachers as practitioner-researchers to broaden shared teacher knowledge within the TESOL community. Included in this analysis are suggestions for improving narrative case studies and conclusions about the usefulness of this approach for teachers interested in researching their teaching.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

To begin any discussion of a research method, it would seem prudent to first create a common frame of reference to help minimize any possible confusion that could arise from a misunderstanding of key terminology. For this paper, it means delineating between two main terms: narrative inquiry (also known as narrative research) and narrative study (also known as analysis of narratives). As a qualitative research methodology, “[n]arrative inquiry is usually understood to be an ethnographic approach to eliciting understandings, whereas narrative study has a greater focus on narrative construction from a variety of perspectives” (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 213). That is, narrative inquiry can be research in which “storytelling is used as a means of analyzing data and presenting findings”, while narrative study is research in which “stories are used as data” (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014, p. 3). Further to this, Connelly and Clandinin (as cited in Clandinin, 2006) make salient points about narratives. They note that narratives can be both phenomenon and method because they specify “the structured quality of experience to be studied,” and “the pattern of inquiry” (p. 45).

The benefit of narrative inquiry as a qualitative research paradigm over other paradigms, according to Johnson and Golombek (2002), is that in the uncovering of the lived experiences of teachers, this research methodology not only facilitates “personal and social growth” in teachers, but it also helps bring “new

meanings and significance to the work of teachers within their own professional landscapes” (p. 3). Further to this, Barkhuizen et al. (2014) add:

The main strength of narrative inquiry lies in its focus on how people use stories to make sense of their experiences in an area of inquiry where it is important to understand phenomena from the perspectives of those who experience them. (p. 2)

Armed with a similar understanding about the unique, emancipatory and felicitous potential of narrative inquiry, Cadman and Brown (2011) turned to this qualitative methodology to find out what was happening to teachers who taught English to Aboriginals in the remote Australian outback. Specifically, they sought to uncover the reasons for high turnover among the typically white females that serve in these low-paying posts, with the hope that the storied lives of their three teacher-narrators would uncover:

- What kind of teachers would sacrifice creature comforts to venture into the outback for a low-paying teaching assignment, and why they would they do so;
- What this teaching environment is like;
- How narrative inquiry is the best method to use in situations like this to liberate truth instead of silencing it with a formalistic methodology that necessitates rigid theoretical analysis.

As mentioned above, narrative inquiry is research in which storytelling is used as a means of analyzing data and presenting findings. This, according to Cadman and Brown (2011), requires a methodological paradigm shift when doing data collection, data analysis, and presenting the findings.

Data collection for Cadman and Brown (2011) was the result of dialogic conversations. That is, it was due to their ability to develop close bonds with their subjects—bonds that were crafted out of an “ethic of caring” (p. 450). In fact, they credit their ability to work collaboratively with their subjects to following Anderson’s guidelines for engaging in dialogue with subjects (as cited in Cadman & Brown, 2011). The analysis and representation of the data was, according to Cadman and Brown, the result of their felt need to answer their research questions and to appeal to readers through narratives. Of note here, Cadman and Brown felt in hindsight that they should have included collaboration from their subjects during this process so that the emancipatory potential of narratives could have been maximized.

Cadman and Brown’s rationale for using narrative in their study was because they wanted to demonstrate how research theory was put into practice by seeking to prove the following three premises: one, that narrative inquiry in some situations affords practitioner-researchers the best option for them to organize and make sense of the world around them; two, that narrative inquiry is uniquely situated to allow the voices of tellers to resonate the colorful intensity of lived experience in the ears and hearts of receivers in a way that allows both tellers and receivers to ascribe their own meaning and value to the lived experience; and three,

that narrative inquiry is simply an “intellectually, educationally, and emotionally satisfying” way of “generating knowledge and insights in contexts traditionally marginalized by mainstream research” (2011, p. 445).

For Cadman and Brown (2011), narrative inquiry allowed them to fulfill their research goals and objectives in a manner that could not have been met through other research methodologies. In response to their first premise, they declared that their research did cause them to make better sense of the world around them: “What we glimpsed through the journey... caused us to rethink our initial expectations... open[ing] up multiple dimensions in our understanding of the three [teacher-narrators] and their worlds” (p. 458). In regards to the second premise, the case study is scattered with bits of narrative data that allow receivers to seek meaning by themselves: Be it the piece that describes a disheveled little girl or the narrative about the inexplicable progress of an illiterate giant of a man, the authors purposely tried not to “make overarching theoretical claims” (p. 456). Finally, in regards to the third premise, Cadman and Brown do a good job of summing up the reward and fit of narrative inquiry for this context:

For us, [the three teacher-narrators] live resoundingly in the stories they tell; the vividness, the messiness, the magnetism of their tellings open up multiple dimensions in our understanding of these women and their worlds, and confirm to us the potential of narrative inquiry in TESOL. (p. 458)

ANALYSIS OF APPROACH

As with any qualitative methodology, each method has its own strengths and weaknesses. Narratives, as this case study highlighted, encourage researchers and receivers to look at phenomena with renewed interest and a more questioning stance. The quote above testifies to the researchers turn to narratives, and, for myself, I found that the narratives from this case study caused me to question my values and opened my eyes to the possibility of a new avenue for research. Barkhuizen (2011) also extols the “transformative power of narrative[s]” by declaring that they serve “as a mediational tool for fostering teacher professional development” (p. 397). That is, narratives promote reflection and self-regulation in teachers to the end that teachers are empowered to make changes to their physical or social environments (i.e. their classrooms).

There is a caveat here though. Did the stories really occur the way they were presented? Cadman and Brown themselves note that narrative artifacts are open to “coercive manipulations of process” (p. 447) because authors ultimately decide what gets included or not in the retelling of stories. Coulter and Smith (2009) point out that “eyewitnesses to the same event have differing accounts depending on their perspectives” (p. 578), while Cohen and Scott (as cited in Benson, 2004, p. 4) further highlight the problematic nature of narrative reliability by pointing out that memories are subject to decline over time. For practitioner-researchers though, Benson (2004) points out that an intimate knowledge of context can provide insights that may improve the validity and reliability of artifacts.

There are other risks involved with narrative inquiry. During the process of

developing bonds with narrators through an ethic of caring, there is the potential for narrative inquiry to become “therapeutic” or “emotionally manipulative” (Cadman and Brown, 2011, p. 450). Also, during dialogic conversations, there is no way of knowing how long it will take to build trust with subjects and there is always the possibility for failure if trust cannot be engendered with narrators. For some, though, the potential benefits of narrative inquiry to uncover true stories may outweigh the risks involved in failing to obtain quality data.

In this case study, the authors do a good job of getting reader attention by describing a context that would make anyone sit up and take notice—“total chaos—kids running everywhere, throwing chairs at each other and me, going to the toilet in the corner of the room” (p. 452). Unfortunately, it is difficult at times to ascertain the significance of this study. How does it contribute to the body of literature on foreign language acquisition? The plot, setting, and central and supporting characters are well described, but what are the implications of this data for TESOL teachers—stay away from the outback unless your hide is as tough as a crocodile’s? Of course, for the stakeholders of the TESOL program in remote Australia, this should serve as impetus for change, but then again, as Pearson notes, the continuing educational failure of remote Australian education has been an ongoing problem (as cited in Cadman & Brown, 2011), and as such will likely continue as so, regardless of the Cadman and Brown case study.

In spite of the fact that this journal article is a page-turner, are peer-reviewed journals, like *TESOL Quarterly*, the best forums for addressing the issues uncovered in this story? The authors themselves said that they want to find a better way “of working with gifted storyteller participants to bring their stories to voice” (p. 457). Maybe one of the various media outlets would be a better forum for getting politicians and community stakeholders to take notice of the need for change. Ultimately though, case studies like this will continue to have criticism leveled against them and struggle to gain wider appeal as long they continue to limit their scope to engendering feelings of sympathy and empathy rather than providing insight and relevance for teachers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this case study is almost devoid of any theory related to foreign language acquisition, and it has no implications for teachers, which is what formalists would take aim at. There is much reflection by the authors throughout this case study, though, but I failed to see how this was relevant to my colleagues and me, practitioner-researchers in higher education in Japan. For example, the authors state that what impressed them the most about their research was that one of the teacher-narrators was teaching abused children, that the students from this context were disadvantaged, and that one teacher could not say goodbye to her student because her contract was suddenly terminated.

In order for narrative inquiry to gain wider acceptance and avoid becoming a methodology that is in vogue today and out of vogue tomorrow, Nelson suggests that practitioner-researchers need to avoid conducting studies that provide “too much detail, too little depth; too much angst, not enough insight; too much about

what happened, not enough about what it all might mean” (as cited in Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 407). Failing to carefully consider how and what is said without providing any implications for teachers will only expedite the speed at which this methodology mirrors the path of other now-redundant research methodologies, like focus group research.

On a positive note, narrative inquiry can help make practitioner-researchers more aware of the learning that is going on in their classrooms. To do this though, they need to gain access to their students’ perspectives on learning and teaching, which, according to Kane and Chimwayange (2014), can only take place when collaborative dialogues have been built upon a foundation of trust. As was seen in this case study, narratives are all about building trust to allow for the voices of subjects to be heard and understood as “retrospective representations of human experience” that reflect the “immediacy of that experience” (Chandinin, 2006, p. 51)—something that cannot be done when one is trying to make determinant conclusions about phenomena.

As I stated above, the Cadman and Brown case study is a page-turner. That is, it has been a reading experience akin to reading the kind of fiction that robs a reader of sleep. Herein lies the attraction of narratives—we all live storied lives and love reading and being told stories. Furthermore, in the literature, narrative research to date has contributed much to the understanding of the teaching profession because, as Barkhuizen et al. (2014) explain, “it helps us to understand the inner mental worlds of language teachers and learners and the nature of language teaching and learning as social and educational activity” (p. 2). Moreover, for teachers that are interested in researching their teaching, narrative inquiry results in a finished product that not only validates practice and knowledge, but it also provides a forum whereby teachers’ individual practices, knowledge, and professions are legitimized.

REFERENCES

- Barkhuizen, G. (2011). Narrative Knowledgeing in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(3), 391-414. doi:10.5054/tq.2011.261888
- Barkhuizen, G. (2013). Introduction: Narrative research in applied linguistics. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Narrative research in applied linguistics* (pp. 1-16). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chik, A. (2014). *Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Benson, P. (2004). (Auto)biography and learner diversity. In P. Benson & D. Nunan (eds.), *Learner stories: Difference and diversity in language learning* (pp. 4-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cadman, K., & Brown, J. (2011). TESOL and TESD in remote aboriginal Australia: The “true” story? *TESOL Quarterly*, 15(3), 440-462. DOI:10.5054/tq.2011.256794
- Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 27(1), 44-54. DOI:10.1177/1321103X060270010301
- Clandinin, D.J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Coulter, C. A., & Smith, M. L. (2009). The construction zone: Literary elements in narrative research. *Educational Researcher*, 38(8), 577-590. DOI:10.3102/0013189X09353787
- Johnson, K. E., & Golombek, P. R. (2002). *Teachers’ narrative inquiry as professional development*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kane, R. G., & Chimwayange, C. (2014). Teacher action research and the student voice: Making sense of learning in secondary school. *Action Research*, 12(1), 52-77. doi: 10.1177/1476750313515282
- Pavelenko, A. (2002). Narrative study: Whose story is it, anyway? *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 213-218. doi: 10.2307/3588332
- Stewart, T. (2006). Teacher-researcher collaboration or teachers’ research? *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(2), 421-430. DOI:10.2307/40264529