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Narratives of Adult ESOL Learners: Successfully Finding Their Way

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Abstract

This article examines narratives about successful uses of English, told and written by adult learners in a beginning-level class of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The learners told stories of using English to solve a problem of getting lost by asking for and receiving directions. In their narratives, we see where they were going, their path to get there, their use of English, and their evaluation of these experiences. An analysis of the structure of the stories indicates learners' inclusion of essential elements of narratives and raises questions about how the learners related to each other's stories. The extended chunks of discourse that the learners produced when telling their stories were longer than what they produced in other genres of speaking and writing in the class. This finding supports the inclusion of various genres of text and talk in an ESOL class for learners at lower proficiency levels.

    Keywords: narrative, ESOL, adult literacy

Narratives of Adult ESOL Learners: Successfully Finding Their Way

Our lives are made up of texts.
They are woven into the stories we tell to make sense of everyday experiences.
(Wallace, 2006, p. 74)

Adult immigrants in the United States who are in early stages of developing proficiency in English are an extremely diverse group. They come from different countries, speak multiple languages, bring diverse educational experiences, and have spent varying lengths of time in the U.S. They are also members of our communities, parents, and workers. Proficiency in English is important to the quality of life in this country and many adult immigrants enroll in classes to improve their English. Almost half of all learners in adult education programs in the U.S. are enrolled in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses. Nearly half of those are at the lowest levels of proficiency (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008). While many beginning-level courses focus primarily on oral language development and survival skills, developing strong English literacy skills has implications for participation in the labor market, income, health, and children's educational achievement (Batalova & Fix, 2015). A sense of personal fulfillment and belonging to a community are further benefits of developing oral and literacy skills.

Learning a second language is a lengthy process, which takes years. This process is further complicated for adult learners who must balance their language learning needs with their other responsibilities and demands on their time and resources. When educators understand learners' life and learning experiences they are able to better support them in their language, personal, and professional development. Yet, adult learners in non-academic ESOL programs, "who are learning English, but not primarily to obtain a postsecondary degree at a college or university" (Bailey, 2006, p. 113), are underrepresented in academic research (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; Ro & Ryu, 2013).

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When adult learners attend ESOL classes, it is imperative that they are engaged in learning activities that are meaningful, relevant to their experience and goals, and encourage their language development. Participatory approaches to language education are based on the notion that "learning will be enhanced if control over and responsibility for learning is concentrated in the hands of learners, or at least shared between learners and resource people" (Burnaby, 2001, p. 307). According to research on curriculum meta-orientations in a widespread language program in Canada, a participatory transformation curriculum was most effective in addressing learners' socioeconomic needs, life goals, preparation for meaningful employment, and for navigating their complex social roles at home, at work, and in the community (Cervatiuc & Ricento, 2012).

The research presented here examines oral and written narratives produced by beginning-level adult learners in an ESOL class that espoused participatory practices. This article describes the process of producing and sharing the narratives and the ways they contributed to the learners' language development and subsequent activities in the course. The learners' stories are discussed in relation to existing literature on narrative and the use of narratives and personal stories in ESOL contexts. This research addresses gaps in the literature on adult learners in non-academic ESOL programs, and on the use of learners' stories and including writing in adult ESOL.

Framing a Strength-Based Perspective of Beginning-Level Learners in Adult ESOL

The narratives examined in this paper are part of a larger study of the development of intercultural communicative competence in an ESOL class I taught at the Asosiyasyon Fanm Ayisyen nan Boston (AFAB), also known as the Association of Haitian Women in Boston. In the classroom and in this research, I adopt a strength-based perspective to draw attention to the interactional accomplishments of these learners in specific situations in which they used English

and in the narrating of their interactions. This perspective is particularly important given the deficit perspectives, silencing, and invisibility that too often surround lower-income immigrant language learners (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005). When a perceived language barrier can silence second language speakers, telling their personal stories is a means for exercising their voices, being noticed, and advocating for themselves and their communities.

Approaching learners and language learning from a perspective of strength allows one to see what learners *can do* and the resources they have available to them to further their learning (Auerbach, 1992; Larrota & Serrano, 2011). In the larger study from which these narratives originated, learners at early stages of second language acquisition were positioned as researchers of their language use outside of the classroom. They used a variety of genres of oral and written English when they recorded, reported on, and discussed their observations. While teachers are often keen observers of learners' language use in the classroom, they are not always aware of what learners can do in other contexts. This narrative activity broadened my understanding of what the learners in the class could accomplish in English in and outside of the classroom. It also provided an opportunity for the learners to present aspects of their identities that are not always evident in the classroom. Furthermore, working within a protective and comfortable environment, the learners in this class clearly produced more language and participated in more genres of discourse than one might expect of "beginners."

Ideologies always underlie the curriculum and tasks of a language class. Pennycook (2001), writing about politics of difference in language learning asks, "What available identities or subject positions do we make available in our classes? And how might we both create more possibilities and find ways of working with students' identity formation?" (p. 157). When I ask learners to take on the roles of researcher, author, and presenter, I am respecting learners'

subjectivity and agency. Bruner (1991), writing from cognitive psychology, emphasizes

"agency" in constructing narrative. Early and Norton (2012) apply his concepts of narrative to an

ESOL context and state, "drawing on Bruner's work, the goal of such an endeavor is not only to

realize the potential of individuals' "actual minds" but to create both for individuals and for

society, more socially just and responsive "possible worlds" (p. 196). An essential element of

this description is that it is the learners themselves who are constructing their possibilities.

Why Include Storytelling in an Adult ESOL Class?

The use of storytelling in this adult ESOL class and analysis of the stories is informed by

research on small stories and narratives. Though some distinguish between the two, I use the

terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably here. An apt definition of personal stories comes

from a previous study of the use of learners' stories in adult ESOL: "short, true stories told or

written by language learners using the first-person narrative voice" (Nicholas, Rossiter, &

Abbott, 2011, p. 249). Telling stories or narratives about personal experience is an activity that

people do in their daily lives, an educational tool, and more specifically a learning task that is

gaining attention in second language education.

People make use of narratives and stories in many aspects of their lives. Bruner (1991)

explains, "there is compelling evidence to indicate that narrative comprehension is among the

earliest powers of mind to appear in the young child and among the most widely used forms of

organizing human experience" (p. 9). According to Vásquez (2011), the value of "small stories"

in teaching English for speakers of other languages is that they emerge from everyday contexts

and are representative of people's everyday lives and selves, illustrating that identities are in

situated contexts. Thus, the use of storytelling is ideal in a course in which I want to incorporate

authentic tasks and integrate learners' lives and experiences into the curriculum.

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Several teacher researchers have written on the values of incorporating learners' stories in ESOL classes. Wajnryb (2003) identifies stories as an age-old means for teaching and learning. Specific to second language acquisition, she explains that stories provide comprehensible input, offer opportunities for learners to use language to communicate with a real audience, and increase learners' motivation. In a literature review on the use of story in ESL classrooms, Nicholas, Rossiter, and Abbott (2011) point to related benefits of stories, including building relationships with others in the classroom and creating learning communities. Additionally, Simpson (2011) describes means and benefits of opening spaces in an adult ESOL lesson for learners to tell longer stories and bring their life experience into the classroom. He describes an interaction with a learner, Luisa, who tells him a personal story in which she "brings in identity positions which present her as a person with agency" (p. 21). Consequently, he advocates for teachers to find ways to integrate learners' stories into the classroom to counter discourses and identity positions ascribed to them by policy or institutions.

ESOL Class and Learners

The narratives in this study were produced in the Spring of 2013 in the Level 1 ESOL class offered by the Asosiyasyon Fanm Ayisyen nan Boston (AFAB). AFAB is a nonprofit association dedicated to the empowerment of Haitian women and children, particularly those who are low-income. The Level 1 English course addresses vocabulary, grammar, and language functions for everyday activities. The goals of the course are to help learners develop a basic familiarity with English to be able to participate in daily tasks and to prepare them for broader involvement in the community. In relation to the research I was conducting, the members of the class participated in a series of activities in which they observed and noted their language use outside of the classroom and brought their findings to class for examination and discussion. The

tasks ranged from identifying a single word, to phrases and exchanges, to the expanded

narratives that are featured here.

AFAB's mission and community environment had a significant impact on the class.

AFAB promotes participants' independence and participation in their communities – ideals that

are well aligned with learning activities that make connections between language use in the

community and the classroom. When mobilizing class members to participate in different

advocacy events, the organization's staff members and leaders repeatedly tell the learners that

everyone counts and their voices are important. Similarly, it was my intention in the research

activities to make space in the class for learners to share their experiences and to encourage

authentic communication (Roberts & Cooke, 2009). In other words, I did not want to draw only

from texts and tasks designed specifically for language learning.

As is common in adult ESOL, the members of this class represented a range of

proficiency levels in English as well as degrees of print literacy in their first languages and

educational backgrounds. Approximately twelve to eighteen learners attended the class each

week from September through May. All but one of the learners had immigrated to the United

States from Haiti within the previous eight years. The other learner had emigrated from Cape

Verde sixteen years prior. Though the class included women and men, women were always the

majority. The learners ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-five. All of the Haitian learners

speak Haitian Creole and have at least basic print literacy skills. Some speak other languages,

French and Spanish, as well. Some appeared to be learning their first English words in the class,

while others were able to carry on basic conversations.

Telling Stories of Successful Uses of English

This storytelling activity offered learners several opportunities to tell a story about an incident in which they were successful using English. It had four main steps: reading a sample text, telling a story in a small group in the learners' first language and then in English, writing the story, and reading the written story in front of the class. The discussion prompt was:

> Think about a time when you used English and were happy or satisfied with the results. What happened? Where were you? Who did you talk to? What did you say? What did the other person say? Why was this a good experience or a success story?

The sample text was a story that was previously told by a learner in the class, Nadege, a Haitian-born woman in her early forties. I distributed printed copies of her story to everyone in the class and asked her to read it aloud[1].

> In 2011, I went to Somerville with my friend, Anne. I got lost. I was lost in the street. I was walking on the sidewalk. I saw people and I talked to them.
>
> I said, "Please, where is the train stop? Could you show me the train stop?"
>
> A lady said, "Come and I will go with you to the station."
>
> I got in the car with the lady. She took me to the train station. I went down in the train station. The train came. I took the train but I didn't know where it was going. When I saw the stop, I didn't know the stop.
>
> I said to Anne, "Maybe we are lost."
>
> She said, "Yes. Let's get off."
>
> I got off the train. I talked to the customer service representative.
>
> I said, "Good afternoon, sir. Can you help me please?"
>
> He said, "What's the matter?"
>
> I said, "I'm lost."

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[1] When Nadege told this story in class, I immediately identified it as a good example for the upcoming activity, which is described here. After class, I recorded her as she retold it. I then typed her story and made copies to share with the rest of the class.

He said, "Where are you going?"

I said, "I'm going to Dorchester."

He said, "Ah, you are really lost!"

I said, "Please, can't you do anything for me?"

He said, "Yes, I can. Wait for me."

The customer service representative took me on the elevator and put me on the other side of the train. I took the train and went to Ashmont Station. After, I took the bus and I went to my home.

After Nadege had read her story to the class, the learners divided into groups of three to tell a story in their first language and then again in English[2]. I asked them to begin with their first language so that they would be able to concentrate on the events of the story without the added burden of composing it English. Because the group members heard each other's stories in their own language first, they were able to help each other figure out unknown words when they then told their stories in English. The homework assignment was for learners to write their story in English. Four learners, out of approximately sixteen in the class, returned to the following class with written stories[3]. I then typed the written stories with more standard grammar and returned them to the learners.

In class, I asked the authors if they would like to read their stories aloud. Josephine, a Haitian-born woman in her early fifties, was the first to volunteer. She stood up and took the floor, literally and figuratively, by walking to the front of the room and reading her story. I sat

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[2] I made an audio recording of seven learners telling their stories, but only three were audible enough to analyze.

[3] This response rate is similar to what I saw in other written homework assignments from the class.

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with the other learners in the circle of chairs facing her and beamed at her courage. Three of the

four learners who wrote a story attended class that day and stood in front of the group to read

them. The third to read did so with a shaking voice and tears in her eyes. However, she was not

deterred by her emotions and persisted until the end of her story. Everyone in the room cheered

at each of these learners' accomplishments.

In order for the learners to share their personal stories in English with one another in

class, it was essential that we had established a level trust and sense of community (Nicholas,

Rossiter, & Abbott, 2011). This supportive environment allowed for successful small group work

that required learners to view their interactions with each other, not just the teacher, as valuable

learning activities. It also enabled learners to take risks in sharing their work in front of the class.

Topic and Content of the Stories

All of the stories that I heard learners telling in class, except for one, and all of the written

stories are about transportation, getting lost, and finding the way. The table below provides an

overview of the narratives that the learners produced. It includes the learners' names[4] and the

modalities for telling the narratives. These include oral, written, or performed, meaning read in

front of the class. The table also presents the learners' goals, which in most cases was arriving at

a specific destination, often for a specified purpose. It also indicates the means the learners used

to achieve their goals, including the modes of transportation they employed and the people with

whom they interacted. Additionally, the table includes a self-assessment that many of the

learners provided of their experiences. When looking at this data, one can appreciate that the

adults in this ESOL class are active community members. We see some of the places they have

been and the resources they identified and used to get there.

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[4] I have used pseudonyms for all of the learners' names.

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Table 1

Overview of Learner Narratives

Learner	Modality / Modalities	Goal	Means to Achieve the Goal	Self-Assessment*
Daniel	Oral Written	Arrive at work in Chinatown	Train and foot Somebody (male) in the street	Expressed gratitude "I said tank you"
Jacques	Oral	Return home after work	Train and foot People at a police station	
Josephine	Oral Written Performed	Arrive at Walmart in Avon to apply for a job Return home afterward	Foot and bus Friend Someone at the fire department Supervisor at Walmart	"I was tired I tired."
Lunine	Oral Written Performed	Return home from downtown	Foot, train, car Someone (female) on the sidewalk Someone on the street (female) Someone with a car	Worried about being lost and surprised at finding someone to help.
Murielle	Oral Written Performed	Arrive at Burlington Coat Factory	Bus Bus driver	
Nadege	Oral	Arrive at client's house for her first day of work as a home health aide	Friend with a personal car GPS	"happy"
Stephan	Oral	Return home after taking the GRE	Bus	Rushed
Violine	Oral	Arrive at the Department of Motor Vehicles	Foot	

* In cases when I have used learners' exact words, I have included them in quotation marks. In other cases, I have paraphrased.

Focusing on the goals and means in the learners' narratives is an effective way to approach them from a strength-based perspective. In the goals of the narratives, the learners presented an aspect of themselves beyond that of language learner; they are workers, potential employees, students, drivers, and consumers. Other than their homes, their destinations were outside of their neighborhoods and cities, and include jobs, a potential place of employment, a GED testing center, the Department of Motor Vehicles, and a store. The narratives indicate the modes of transportation that the learners navigated including public transportation (buses and trains[5]) and personal transportation (foot and car) to get to their destinations. The people that the learners talked to in order to get help include a range of official community workers (bus driver, mass transit customer service representative, someone working in a police station, someone working in a fire station), and people on the street who were willing to provide directions, and in two cases, offer a ride in a personal car.

When navigating the city, the learners were compelled to use English with others in their immediate surroundings to orient themselves. When producing narratives in class, they were in a uniquely sheltered classroom environment where they were comfortable enough to use extended chunks of English to tell a story. Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck (2005) discuss competencies of multilinguals in real environments stating, "the issue of competencies is far too rarely dealt with as something which is connected to situation occurrences in an environment which has its own spacio-temporal characteristics" (p. 199). They argue that when ethnography is used to examine competency, the situatedness of competence is highlighted over competence being an individual attribute. Accordingly, in the learners' use of English to navigate their way to

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[5] "Train" was the word students used to refer to the subway and the commuter rail.

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a given destination and in their sharing of their narratives in the ESOL class, their successful

communication in a particular situation is highlighted over their assigned language proficiency

level.

When learners are asked to share their personal stories in the classroom, their stories need

to be valued (Nicholas, Rossiter, & Abbott, 2011). In this case, the learners' narratives

influenced subsequent conversations and instruction. The oral stories spurred conversations in

the small groups in which the learners served as resources for one another on topics such as bus

routes, how to get a job, and the difference between "know" and "understand." The content of

learners' oral and written narratives provided me with more detailed understanding of their

experiences, which in turn informed my development of relevant course activities and class

discussions. Though I had always seen myself as respectful of the learners in my class, the

contents of their stories made me realize that my primary lens for interacting with them was as

language learners and not in terms of all of the other roles that they play in their lives (e.g.

workers, job applicants, friends, GED students). When I was reminded of their other roles, I

could relate to them on different levels and more effectively elicit their expertise in other class

activities.

Analysis of Narrative Structure

The narrative task described in this paper involved several steps that included multiple

iterations of the same story, with a focus on conveying a message. There was no explicit

instruction in class on how to structure an oral or written narrative. However, as adults, the

learners are familiar with the concept of recounting an event. An analysis of their written

narratives indicates that they included many of the features that Labov (1972, 1997) has defined

as essential to narratives.

In Labov's (1972) work on the structure of narratives, he defined them as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequences of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred" (p. 359-360). He described narratives as including a beginning, middle and end, and six key elements: 1) abstract; 2) orientation; 3) complicating action; 4) evaluation; 5) result or resolution; and 6) coda. The narratives that the learners produced have many of these. In Nadege's story (see page 9), she began with an abstract and orientation addressing the questions of who, what, when, and where. "In 2011, I went to Somerville with my friend, Anne. I got lost." The orientation is followed by the complicating action, "I was lost in the street," which is the crux of the matter. This is followed by another orientation, asking for directions and receiving a ride to the train station. Another complicating action occurs she was lost on the train and did now know the stop where she should get off. Her statement of "I'm lost" is followed by another orientation when the customer service representative asks her where she is going and she replies. He then provides an evaluation "Ah, you are really lost!" This is followed by another complicating action when she asks what he can do for her, followed by resolution that entailed getting on the correct train to the correct station and taking a bus home. A coda, which Nadege did not include, is not considered an essential component of a narrative.

Murielle, a Haitian-born woman in her mid-forties, was one of the four learners who wrote a narrative. Her story about taking a bus to a store[6], also includes the essential components of a narrative: abstract, orientations, complicating action, and resolution (Labov, 1972).

> I live in dorchoster. I wanted to go to burlington factory cost. I went to ashmont station I
> took the right bus, but I left on the wrong stop. I asked the bus driver what stop. He said it

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[6] Murielle's narrative is typed here with the same spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar as it had in its original hand-written form.

was the last stop, he ask where are you going? I said I'm going to burlington. He said you were suposed to take the one before. I had to go back and take an other bus.

In this narrative, Murielle references Nadege's story in its similar topic, inclusion of essential elements of a narrative, and constructed dialogue. It is worth appreciating that Murielle used English to solve a real problem and that there are no errors in her writing that interfere with understanding her message.

Two of the other learners who wrote narratives included the narrative components described above as well as a coda, a final comment indicating the end. Josephine concluded her story about taking a bus to a job interview and home in the cold and rain with, "I was tired I tired." Lunine concluded her story about trying to find the train station to get home with "I was willy [really] surprise that I'm lost I find someone to help me." These final comments provide further insight into how the learners felt about their situations, in addition to seeing them as successful uses of English.

Influences and Considerations in Using an Example Text

The previous sections describe ways in which learners' written narratives related closely to the example provided, Nadege's story, both in terms of topic and structure. This is similar to what happened in other writing tasks in the course, for which I provided many examples and models to demonstrate how to complete tasks and assignments. On one hand, this use of examples provided direction and structure for learners' responses. On the other hand, the repetition of topics from the examples makes me question if they limited learners' range of responses. Perhaps the examples were perceived as the "right" answer to copy. In fact, as one group of three learners started the oral story telling task, Jacques looked at the printed example and started to retell it. Nadege responded, "It's not that. In your brain." He then proceeded to tell his own story. This raises the question of the extent to which learners viewed themselves as

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reproducing language presented to them, creating new meanings, or both. In a broader sense, this

relates to the roles they see for themselves in the speech community of our classroom. Did the

learners see themselves as storytellers, authors, experts of their own experience, and contributors

to the development of the course? Or, did they see themselves as learners, practicing English and

fulfilling pedagogical tasks? Because I cannot answer this question now, I see it as something I

can address more explicitly with learners in the future. I can do this by being clear about the

purposes behind different tasks in the classroom and talking about our different roles and

experience that inform the way we participate in these tasks.

An alternative approach to consider the similarities among the texts is by examining

intertextuality. Bloome et al. (2005) define intertextuality as:

A word, phrase, stylistic device, or other textual feature in one text refers to another text;

two or more texts share a common referent or are related because they are the same genre

or belong to the same setting, or one text leads to another. (p. 40)

Intertextuality is a concept that can address ways that people create meaning in everyday

language use and reflects Bakhtin's (1981) assertion that all language is dialogic. In this view,

the oral and written narratives that learners produced can be seen as referring to and speaking to

one another. Admittedly, as the teacher and researcher, I was initially discouraged when I found

that all but one of the learners' stories were on the same topic, thus revealing my expectation of

hearing stories of successful uses of English from a broader range of situations. I became

encouraged when I acknowledged the similarities as intertextuality because I could appreciate

that it involved understanding and responding to one another's texts. When learners told their

stories in groups, the listeners commented on each other's stories. Learners' use of examples and

responses to one another's texts underscores the importance of using texts in adult ESOL courses that reflect the learners' lived realities (Pennycook, 2001; Thornbury, 2013; Wallace 2006).

Storytelling Genre and Producing Extended Chunks of Discourse

In the oral and written storytelling activities, the learners produced extended discourse, beyond what they produced in other types of activities in the class that involved different genres of speech and writing. This phenomena is described by Garcia (2013) who states:

> Story telling is another way that a participant can produce an action which is longer than a single turn at talk. By getting the floor to tell a story, a speaker can then hold the floor for an extended period of time. (p. 130)

The quantity of language the learners produced is significant because it challenges commonly held beliefs on what learners at lower levels of proficiency can do, and therefore what they are given the opportunity to do in a classroom setting.

The oral narratives that I recorded and the written narratives that I collected were longer, measured by number of words, than other spoken turns and written answers that the learners produced in other activities in the class. The oral narratives that I recorded ranged in length from 143 to 169 words, and the written narratives ranged from 58 to 173 words. In order to put these word counts into perspective, I have compared them with other class activities and to descriptors of various proficiency levels. These comparisons indicate what an accomplishment it is for the learners to produce these longer texts.

The following table presents the number of words learners produced in various genres of writing and speaking in the class. The table provides the number of words in the learners' written narratives followed by the number of short answer responses that she or he wrote on other homework assignments and the average number of words per response. An example of a writing

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prompt for such a homework assignment is: "At the end of each day this week, think about

when, where, why, and with whom you used English. For each day, write one or more things that

you did in English." The table also provides the number of words in the learners' oral narratives.

This number is followed by the number of turns she or he took during three in-class discussions

and the average number of words per turn.

Table 2

Average Number of Words in Learner Spoken Turns and Written Text

Learner	Number of words in written narrative	Number of written short answer responses*	Average number of words in written short answer responses *	Number of words in oral narrative	Number of turns recorded during in-class discussions**	Average number of words per turn in recorded in-class discussions **
Daniel	58	11	15.36	-	-	-
Jacques	-	-	-	~163	31	2.54
Josephine	122	37	12.56	-	85	5.7
Lunine	173	33	4.06	-	13	4.38
Murielle	74	29	11.62	-	66	4.59
Nadege	-	5	15.4	~148	6	10.66
Stephen	-	4	10.25	~169	58	2.74

* Each learner completed a different number of seven possible written homework assignments, each eliciting several short answer responses. I counted the words in the responses that the learners gave.

** The turns were counted from written transcripts of 63 minutes of class time over three class sessions including two teacher-fronted whole class discussions and one small group discussion led by the teacher.

For all of the learners, their written and oral narratives about their personal experiences were longer than the average number of words in their written responses on other homework assignments and their turns in class discussions. It would take several written short answer responses or several turns in a discussion to achieve the same number or words that learners produced in their narratives. For example, Josephine's written narrative contained 122 words. Whereas, in the 37 short answer responses she wrote for other tasks, her average number of words per answer was 12.56. The differences in oral language are even greater. For example, Stephen's oral narrative was approximately 169 words; while, the total number of words he produced in 58 turns in class discussions was only 159 because his contributions were so brief. This is an average of 2.74 words per turn.

These observations about the length of learners' utterances are consistent with Simpson's (2011) synthesis of previous studies of the use of narrative in adult ESOL "that demonstrate how encouraging students to claim control of the classroom discourse gives them an opportunity to generate language themselves and produce more fluent and extended turns in talk" (p. 12). The storytelling prompt in this study elicited longer responses because of the elaboration it requires to tell a story and because the learners were reporting on their lived experience. They were already familiar and involved with the content of their stories.

The length of learners' narratives, turns in conversation, and written responses reported above can also be compared to descriptions of various proficiency-levels. The National Reporting System's educational functioning level descriptors for English as a second language[7] are used in determining reasonable expectations for learners at a given proficiency level. For

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[7] These are the definitions that are used to interpret standardized tests, such as Oral BEST and BEST Literacy, which are widely used to measure English language proficiency of learners in adult education programs across the country.

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example, they state that a high beginning ESL leaner can orally "express immediate needs, using

simple learned phrases or short sentences" and write "some simple sentences with limited

vocabulary" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 22). A low intermediate ESL learner can

orally "express basic survival needs and participate in some routine social conversations" and

write "simple notes and messages on familiar situations" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015,

p. 22). While simple questions and answers about known topics with formulaic language are

expected of high beginners and low intermediates, the learners in the class demonstrated that

they could produce more expanded language when prompted to do so. It is also notable that the

tasks described here focused on meaning, rather than form, and there was no explicit instruction

on narrative structure before the learners participated in this activity. However, given more time

to develop the task, I would have provided time to write in class; we would have read and

discussed more example texts, for meaning and genre characteristics; and I would have guided

learners in attending to specific forms so that they could revise their own writing. I presume that

these steps would lead to even more developed narratives.

    One important take-away is to offer learners opportunities to engage in different types of

speaking and writing, even when they are in early stages of their language development. Prompts

and questions eliciting short phrases and simple sentences may be most appropriate for the

proficiency level of most members of the class, but one way to move beyond this stage is by

engaging in expanded speaking and writing. Telling a story of something that happened is a

genre of speaking that adults are already familiar with and therefore, a safe and meaningful one

to include in a lower-level ESOL course. As previously discussed, when we look at learners'

situated use of English, we can start to break down a broader notion of what it means to be a

"beginner" and address what learners can do in authentic interactions.

Conclusion

This paper explores narratives that adult learners of English produced in a "beginning level" ESOL class. In all of the learners' narratives, they had a set destination, either outside of their neighborhood or returning home; they got lost along they way; they used English to interact with at least one other person to get directions; and they navigated their way to their destination. These events alone are an achievement and symbolic of intercultural experience and competence. The retelling of them is a testament to the narrators' language development.

This examination of the narratives and process of producing them has generated several considerations and justifications for future uses of narrative in adult ESOL classes. First, learners had an opportunity to use multiple modalities to produce an expanded text, orally and in writing. Next, learners shared their narratives with a real audience and had a chance to respond to each other's stories. Additionally, the content of the narratives significantly influenced me, as the teacher, reminding me of the roles, responsibilities, and strengths the learners have outside of the classroom and bring to their learning. All of these findings contribute to countering deficit views of learners who are at early stages of language proficiency. For all of these reasons, the construction and sharing of these narratives was a meaningful learning activity in a language class offered by an organization committed to listening to and amplifying the voices of its constituents.

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