

## **Exploring Teachers' Perceptions with the Narrative Inquiry Approach**

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### **Abstract**

Within social research, moving beyond traditional methods of inquiry and away from numbers, variables, tables and questionnaires researchers can judiciously adopt the narrative inquiry approach of knowing and interpreting. Narratives are a medium for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and explore options to develop better approaches. This research methodology, when used in the context of teaching and learning, offers a means to reconnoitre teachers' concerns, roles and performance. Narrative is a likely way of making sense into the experience that has a particular value in fostering teachers' reflective thinking.

**Key words:** Narrative, Inquiry, Teacher, Interview, Data.

### **Introduction**

Narrative inquiry (NI) in language education research provides a means to grasp the complexities of learning and teaching and paving the growth of ideas for improvements in teaching practice. Narratives offer structural flexibility both as content and form. The process of narrative is about accessing and retelling yet another narrative. It is important to understand how teachers conceive their subject matter and what pedagogical strategies they use to facilitate the learning. Narrative inquiry research in teaching and learning is concerned with the stories of teachers and learners about their lived and imagined experiences.

The narrative is the respondents' or the teachers' reconstruction of the past shaped by the particular context of the telling. Connelly and Clandinnin (2006) stress the relevance of interpreting teachers' stories within their three-dimensional space proposal: Temporality, Sociality and Place. In Temporality the researcher is considering "the past, present, and future" of the participants. As for Sociality (or interaction), it is important to analyse the personal and social elements of the stories.

Sociality relates to two concepts: the personal, which is linked to the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of the person; and the social, which is linked to the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors, and people that form the individual's context. With regard to the component of Place (or situation), Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) affirm that situation or place also ought to be analysed in a transcript or text for narrative researchers should look for specific situations in the storyteller's landscape; these may be physical places or the sequence of the storyteller's places.

From the different ways to study narratives, Cortazzi (1993) believes NI is one of the approaches that better informs and accounts for teachers' knowledge, since it focuses less on problematic situations, life transitions and turning points in teachers' lives (as autobiography and life stories do) and more on the everyday business of the classroom. Its purpose is to explain the experiential understanding of teachers' thinking in terms of practices. Teachers' stories, personal and professional, help us understand how they teach and the ways students acquire approach and engage with the world. The educational knowledge is embodied with practical day-to-day teaching experience; the related narrative seems to be a particularly suitable key to teachers' knowledge.

### **The Narrative Inquiry Framework**

The narrative interview is classified as a qualitative research method (Lamnek, 1989; Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995; Riesman, 1993; Flick, 1998). It is considered a form of unstructured, in-depth interview with explicit features. The narration schema substitutes the question-answer schema that defines most interview situations. The underlying presupposition is that the perspective of the interviewee is best revealed in stories where the participant is using his or her own spontaneous language in the narration of events. The active role of the interviewee particularly distinguishes the narrative interview from other qualitative data gathering methods. The narrative interview is conducted over four phases: it starts with the initiation, moves through the narration and the questioning phase, and ends with the concluding talk phase.

Preparation	Exploring the field Formulating analytical questions
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Initiation	Formulating initial topic for narration using aids
Main narration	No interruptions Only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling Wait for the coda
Questioning phase	Only ‘What happened then?’ No opinion and attitude questions No arguing or contradictions No why-questions Analytical into interview questions
Concluding talk	Stop recording Why-questions allowed Memory-protocol immediately after interview

*Basic phases of the narrative interview (adapted from Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)*

The way the interviewer starts the interview, co-determines the excellence of the narration. The iteration of narration and questioning may sometimes create a haziness between the narrative interview and the semi-structured interview (Bauer, Martin W.; Gaskell, G, 2000). A narrative is formally structured and follows a self-generating schema.

It ought to be noted that the narrative interview, is shaped by many factors. Apart from the subject and purpose of the research itself, the participant’s personality, the researcher’s personal style, and the relationship between participant and researcher all have an impact on the shape of the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Qualitative interviewing is forgiving, Rubin and Rubin (2005) remind us, because it recognizes “that researchers as well as conversational partners are individuals with emotions, biases, and interests”. The researcher must therefore be alert to factors that might influence the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) pointed out, “(e)thical considerations infiltrate narrative inquiries from start to finish: at the outset as end-in-view are imagined; as inquirer-participant relationships unfold, and as participants are represented in research texts”.

Therefore, ethical considerations are embedded in the collaborative relationship throughout the undertaking of narrative inquiries.

While narratives describe the participants' stories, it is the researcher who decides how to translate the stories, what stories to include, and how to edit and organize the final product (Chase, 2005). Creswell (2007) noted that in conducting narrative research there are challenges involved that should be recognized and meted out aptly. One challenge is collecting extensive data about the participants in order to get a comprehensive grasp on the topic that is researched (Creswell, 2007). The researcher should analyse and discuss the analysis with the participant while reflecting on the way that the researcher helped to shape the analysis (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1995). The participant chooses what to say and the researcher chooses what to relay so it should be noted that there is no one true representation of narratives. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) have referred to narrative interviewing belonging to the „interview society“, the NI interview broadly been recognized as an impartial method of data collection, producing honest and truthful effects within the framework of a relationship between interviewer and interviewee which is unbiased and rational.

The processes of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process; they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project. Qualitative researchers often "learn by doing" (Dey, 1993) data analysis. The narrative interview is a technique for generating stories; it is open in regard to the analytical procedures that follow data collection. Embedded in Reissman's (2008) approaches to narrative analysis are four different analytic approaches: thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic/performance analysis, and visual analysis. The inclusion of the conversational interaction in the report influences a compassionate thinking which leads to a comprehensive interpretation and reflection of the data accounted by the researcher.

The methods of conducting a narrative study do not follow a lock-step approach, but instead represent an informal collection of the related data. Narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was. The "truths" of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future.

## Some Research Studies Based on Narrative Inquiry

Some of research studies wherein narrative inquiry approach was involved exploring the teacher experiences have generated meaningful educational data. The teacher narratives present their journey of professional development and their practices, and their experiences of learning and study their perceptions of teaching and learning.

Yueting Xu and Yongcan Liu research scholars (2015) explored teachers' assessment knowledge and practice through a narrative inquiry of a college English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher, in China. This narrative inquiry revealed that teacher knowledge is not a static end product, but a highly complex, dynamic, and on-going process.

Liping Wei (2012), a research scholar, employed the narrative inquiry approach to explore the second language practices in English with four participants from China in the U.S. The inquiry shed light on whether China's English language teachers should enact CLT or not, in an inclusive and virtual way.

Samira Nikian (2014) in her study "A Study of Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching Approach" used in- depth interview to elicit data as the main instruments for the study. The results of this study indicated that Iranian EFL teachers hold favourable perceptions toward principles of Communicative Language Teaching. She also states that the findings of this study are significantly different from previous related research where it was found that EFL teachers mainly pursued traditional practices and have unfavourable perceptions of Communicative Language Teaching approach.

Mendieta Aguilar (2010) researched a group of three teachers who work for the foreign languages department of a private university in Colombia. The study was aimed at unveiling and characterizing the narrative knowledge these teachers hold about language teaching and learning processes as well as the role this knowledge plays in the constant construction and evaluation of the curriculum. Data was collected with concept maps, bio data surveys, narrative interviews, and participant observation within a narrative inquiry approach to research.

Christine Manara (2012) in her research study critically and reflexively explores the professional learning of five English language teacher educators (of Indonesian nationality) in an Indonesian context. She used a narrative-based inquiry framework (cf. Cole & Knowles, 2000; Doecke & Parr, 2009; Riessman, 2002) to generate critical accounts of these teacher

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educators describing, reflecting upon and conceptualizing their teacher “professionalism” within the context of Indonesian society and culture.

Leslie Maureen, University of Iowa (2011) in her thesis, *Stories from international teachers: A narrative inquiry about culturally responsive teaching*, examined how international teachers’ positions, experiences and perspectives affect their attention to culture within their classrooms and investigates what we can learn from their unique teaching perspectives. Narrative inquiry is a base used for analysing the stories the teachers tell about their personal and professional experiences in this study.

Golombek and Johnson, (2004), ELT researchers have noted that narrative inquiry is not only a method of inquiry, but also an object of research in teacher education. In the course of creating an appropriate researcher “signature” in the collaborative process of storytelling, while perceives on being fully involved and “falling in love” with the participants The narrative inquirers should also “step back and see their own stories in the inquiry, the stories of the participants, as well as the larger landscape on which they all live” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Adopting a narrative approach means seeing research as a channel for communicating with the teachers for reflecting their experience.

## **Conclusion**

Narratives do not express for themselves or have unanalysed value; they need interpretation when used as data in social research. The interpretation does not end with the completed research report, for the final narrative opens up a wide range of interpretations by others who read and perceive about the report (Ricoeur, 1990). Given the procedures and the characteristics of narrative research, it is no doubt a challenging but useful approach towards enhancing teaching and education consortium. Naoko Aoki, Professor at the Graduate School of Letters at the Osaka University, opines that narrative inquiry implies not only the management of a research instrument for the researcher, but also the possibility to carrying out research as a participant and researcher, “narrative inquiry can be transformative”. (Aoki, 2007). Narrative inquiry then, is a qualitative research method that offers an option to any social or humanistic science in order to exploit the potential data provided through the stories of the people.

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