

Researching Identity and Language Learning: Taking a Narrative Approach

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The paper attempts to reinforce the significance of taking a narrative approach in identity studies in the field of applied linguistics and language learning research. Over the past two decades, there has been an exponential growth in the amount of research on identity, and the issue has been probed from two broad methodological 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 in learning a foreign language. Researchers interested in exploring the matter from the latter approach tend to adopt a narrative oriented perspective both in their methodology and analysis since they understand that narrative informs the concept of self and identity. It is widely understood that we construct ourselves through narratives that we share with each other (Bruner 1986,1987,1990). But how can narration actually construct self? This paper attempts to shed light on this issue by 1) following the poststructuralist understanding of identity, and 2) by framing narratives as experience and a meaning-making phenomena (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The rise of learner centered research

Prioritizing a more social or contextual orientation of the notion of SLA (Second Language Acquisition) was not particularly new even in the 1960s (Lafford, 2007; Swain and Deters, 2007). However, the approach received prominence with Firth and Wagner's landmark article in 1997 that called for "an epistemological and methodological broadening and enriching of SLA" (Firth & Wagner, 2007 p.91) by emphasizing the social and contextual dimensions of SLA and language learning research. What Firth and Wagner argue here holds considerable significance for the purpose of this paper. By framing 'learning' as a social

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process, Firth and Wagner (2007), drawing on the works of Lave and Wenger (1991), view the process of learning as an “inseparable part of ongoing activities, situated in social practice and social interaction” (ibid p.807). Located in this broader notion of language learning, it is not difficult to understand why identity has come to be seen as a key element in understanding language learning. Framing language learning as a social process inherently implies that learning a second language will often involve a struggle for participation in a new social environment (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000) where the process takes on board a host of sociocultural and contextual factors that preclude discussion on subjectivity, agency, and multiple identities. Learning through participation is an emerging process in which constructs such as agency, voice, power, and control intermittently intertwine with societal structure.

Such a call for a more socially informed approach to the understanding of second or foreign language learning (for example, Block, 2003; Firth & Wagner, 2007; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Zhu Hua et al., 2007), on one hand opened up new avenues of inquiry for language learning studies that enabled researchers to speak to broader issues surrounding an individual’s language learning process. The most notable shift here was the rise of learner-focused research, where the learners’ perception of their educational experiences was recognized to provide valuable insights in their learning process (for example, Benson and Nunan, 2005). The significance this holds for studies that followed thereafter was in its contribution to depicting learners as a multifaceted social being. This more widely formulated understanding of learners not only saw a need for additional theoretical constructs in the studies of SLA and language learning, but also a necessity to re-examine its research methodology and methods, particularly, one that has the scope to include a series of more complex human-centered issues. With the emphasis placed on the learner, we have witnessed the tradition of using narrative accounts in language learning research (Bell, 2002; Pavlenko, 2007). Here, researchers acknowledge the significance of eliciting stories from the participants themselves, and regard them as legitimate sources of data that could complement the more traditional empirical approaches (for example, Kanno, 2003; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Norton, 2000). As many leading narrative researchers have claimed narrative inquiry is a ‘tool’ that offers alternative ways to examine issues that are otherwise inaccessible using more ‘experimental’ methodologies (Bruner 1986,1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Against this backdrop, identity research has relied heavily on narratives as its main methodology and methods of inquiry.

Social constructivist and poststructuralist notion of identity

The social constructionist approach to identity is one of the key elements in applied

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linguistics and contemporary language learning research. It is based on the understanding that reality is constructed through discourse and discursive interaction. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional line of thinking whereby the mind is presumed to reflect or ‘mirror’ the world. Social constructionists are skeptical of the long held assumptions of reality, rationality, objectivity and truth (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). They challenge the idea that knowledge of the world ‘as it really exists’ can be attained through scientific empirical methods (Gergen, 1999). Instead, they contend that the world is not simply found or discovered, but is constructed through the social interaction between the individual with her surroundings through various semiotic means, mainly language. Knowledge and understanding is thus socially constructed and grounded in its own unique historical and cultural context (Mead, 1934). Under the social constructivist paradigm, identity needs to be discussed in terms of the following two key elements: first, identity is the result of social relations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and, second, that this socially constructed identity is dynamic, fluid, and multifaceted (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2002). Let us examine how this is enacted in our everyday life.

When you meet a person for the first time, what do we do? Very likely we would find ourselves (both consciously or unconsciously) trying to make sense of our experience by grouping these people into “categories”. We would try to identify them this way as these categories help us to distinguish them from other people. As Woodward (2002) claims, “identity is essentially about differentiation”. We may have grouped them in terms of, for instance, their sex, race, ethnicity, age, nationality, social class, or profession. In other words, we tend to ascribe “categories” to our interlocutors often even before a word is uttered. In the current ‘developed’ consumer societies, people often “label” others based on the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, the movies they see, and by the books they read since cultural and symbolic artifacts are interpreted as a manifestation of oneself. Furthermore, with technological developments readily available to most people of developed countries, these encounters do not necessary have to happen face-to-face; identity work can also be electronically mediated. A good example that illustrates this point might be Wan Shun Eva Lam’s research (2004) that documents a case study of two Hong Kong Chinese immigrants living in California who developed new English- mediated Chinese identities through their chat room exchanges with interlocutors of an international Chinese community. In this modern technological world, it is thus not unusual for us to find ourselves labeling our experiences, and hence, our identities, in our attempts to construct meaning and understanding of the world around us including ones in virtual space.

However, from the social constructionists and poststructuralist point of view, these

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representations that people ascribe to others have often far more reverberating implications than what is usually envisaged by more essentialist notions of identity. The picture is far more complex and dynamic. Rather than ascribing a set of pre-determined categories to people, the social constructionists and the poststructuralists understand identity to be constructed and co-constructed as we engage in different activities. For instance, in my case, in the course of a single day, my identity can shift from being a mother, a wife, an English instructor at a university, a researcher, a doctoral student, and a colleague to my fellow instructors at my university. Furthermore, I could also be, for example, a mother to my daughters, and simultaneously, a language educator to my colleagues and students, and so forth. In other words, in different situations with different interlocutors we are attributing different facets of identity that could be perceived as essentially the same.

The following excerpt from Alberto Manguel's (2007) "The City of Words" aptly reflects the current poststructuralist view of identity:

We live in a world of fluid borders and identities. The slow movements of migration and conquest that defined the shape of the earth for thousands of years have, in the past few decades, accelerated a hundredfold so that, as in a fast-forwarded film nothing and no one seems to remain fixed in one place for a long time. Attached to a certain site through birth, blood-ties, learned affection or acquired need, we relinquish or are forced to relinquish these attachments and shift into new allegiances and devotions that in turn will shift again, sometimes backward, sometimes forward, away from an imagined center. These movements cause anxiety, individually and socially. Individually, because our identity change with displacement. We leave home forcibly or through choice, as exiles and refugees or immigrants or travelers, threatened or persecuted in our homeland or merely attracted by other landscapes and other civilizations. Socially, because if we stay, the place we call home changes.The terrible question that the Caterpillar asks Alice in Wonderland has always been difficult to answer; today in our kaleidoscopic universe, it has become so precarious as to be almost meaningless: Who are You?. (p.145)

What figures prominently in Manguel's description here is how it can be linked to 'ambivalence 'as some regard themselves as 'displaced' (Kanno, 2003; Baynham & De Fina, 2005). The increased potential for multiple and hybrid identities (Block, 2008; Caldas-Coulthard, 2008; Kanno, 2003) as a consequence of technological advancement as well as an array of different lifestyle options offered in the current globalized world have complicated divisions such as class, race, and gender, which have in turn, equally contributed

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to an increasing sense of ambiguity towards one sense of self.

The social constructionists and poststructuralist take on identity is thus understood as being multiple, unstatic, relational, contextually situated, and emerging in interactions within a particular discourse. But then, how do we account for the changeable, multiple character of one's identity? One explanation is that unity and coherence in the diversity of our identities can be observed if we regard that aspects of our identity are interrelated with other dimensions of our identity. Which aspect of our "identities" becomes salient is very often contingent upon place and time (Block, 2007; Omoniyi, 2007). Another explanation can yet be given by regarding identity as an ongoing narrative project, or what Giddens (1991) calls "biographical continuity", in which we tell stories of our selves by weaving events from the past, present, and projected events from the future.

Narrative and the notion of experience

The term 'narrative' is riddled with various interpretations, and in spite of the vast amount of literature on narratives in recent years, there is a lack of precision in the terminology that surrounds this topic (for example, Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008; Elliot, 2005; Reismann, 2008). In order to avoid submerging ourselves in murky waters, I would like to suggest that we understand it basically as a discourse or a way of using language to construct stories (Bruner, 1990). This holds various implications: firstly, it indicates that narrative is a means by which individuals define and recreate themselves through the discursive construction of identity (Martinez-Roldan, 2003); secondly, it suggests that individuals organize their experiences in terms of stories (Burr, 2003)¹. Following the latter, narratives are understood fundamentally as stories of experiences in this paper.

Narrative texts in previous language learning research exists in a variety of forms - diaries, life-history, journals, language learning memoirs, on-line texts, face-to-face interviews, and, more recently, even visual technology (photography, painting, collage, etc.) (Page, 2010) - and are subjected to various kinds of analysis. Many studies indicate that the works in this area have become very instrumental in addressing the broader issues connected with language learning as well as in identifying the interplay of the various "factors" that could influence the language learning process. For instance, examining diaries offers insights

¹ Many academics tend to use 'stories' and 'narratives' interchangeably, but a characteristic feature of narrative that distinguishes it from stories lies in its flexibility to encompass narrative structure as well as the manner and circumstances of the telling: in other words, the *what* as well as *how* the story is/was told.

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into learners' private world on how they conceptualize their language learning experiences (Schumann, 1980; Bailey, 1983). Autobiographic narratives collected through "talks" and "conversations" with the participants have opened pathways for researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding on new theoretical constructs for studying language learning such as anxiety, emotions, investment, motivation, agency, power, and, of course, identity (Norton, 2000; Angelil-Carter, 1997; Harklau, 1994; Heath, 1983; Hunter, 1997; Day, 2002; Lam, 2000; McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003; Toohey, 2001; Willet, 1995). Learner differences such as beliefs and learning strategies that have traditionally followed a more empirical approach have also been explored using narratives as exemplified in the studies by Kalaja and Barcelos (2006) and Oxford and Green (1996). To these researchers, narrative inquiry was attractive instruments that helped to encapsulate the "human essence" involved in language learning.

Although the list of studies using narrative inquiry here is, of course, not exhaustive, the common thread that runs throughout these works is its focus on narrative as *experience*. In fact, many academics in narrative research have regarded experience as the distinguishing feature that separates narratives from other kinds of qualitative study (for example, Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reismann, 2008; Ricoeur, 1984, 1991; Goodson et al, 2010). In the experience-centered approach, narratives are the means of human sense-making: human beings create meaning from their experiences both individually and socially (Bruner 1986, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1991). Connelly and Clandinin (1990), for instance, have argued that narrative inquiry stems from an understanding of human experience in which humans, both individually and socially, lead storied lives. It is "storied" in the way that people make sense of who they are and others are as they interpret their past in terms of these stories to talk about their present selves as well as their future selves. Narrativization is not only about people telling their past experience, but how individuals understand those experiences, and in thereby ascribing meanings to those actions (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). People draw together disconnected experiences (including actions or events), and provide meanings to them. As Cananave notes, "it is this power of narrative to ascribe meaning to parts, and to configure them into wholes, that define narrative as a meaning-making phenomenon" (2007, p.18).

An example of how narrative provided meaning to one of my participants' language learning experience can be illustrated in the following extract where she talks about her first 'encounter' with English:

Mieko: My mother used to play a lot of songs from Disney movies – we went to

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Disneyland, watched Disney movies, and she bought me a lot of things with Mickey and Minnie on it. It stirred up my interest in listening to those Disney songs, and she would play it quite often. *Come to think of it now, I think she was trying to expose me to a different kind of sound and rhythm than the one I was used to: English !! It was fun !* (author's emphasis in italics).

From this short, simple excerpt from the interview transcription, we see my participant trying to make sense of her mother actions in encouraging my participant to listen to English songs back in her early childhood. By referring to this episode, and narrating it, my participant was connecting or weaving parts of her language learning experience into meaningful larger chunks as a way to construct a sense of coherence from her many fragmented memories of her experiences in learning English. Narratives constitutes past experience at the same time as it suggest ways for individuals to make sense of the past which may set a direction for their future learning.

Social nature of experience

Founded on the understanding of narratives as experience and as means for human meaning-making, narrative inquiry is not only about personal or individual experiences, but it also emphasizes the social, cultural, and historical context in which individuals' experiences are formed, including how identities are constructed, shaped and expressed. The experience-centered approach to narratives is in fact highly influenced by Deweyan ontology of experience (1938), in particular, his two principles of *continuity and interaction*. Dewey's *continuity* concerns not only the immediate context, but also on how to draw connections among experiences (Johnson & Golombek, 2002) or how past experiences fashion the way individuals interpret new life circumstances, or how new experience changes the way how experiences could be understood. Experience is not just a mental state, but also the interactions of the individuals with the environment (*interaction*). Understanding narratives as experience implies that narratives are not simply individual productions, but includes a social dimension as well. Personal experiences need to be grounded in light of the participants' wider social and historical context (Reissman, 1993; 2008). Furthermore, as Pavlenko (2002) states the social aspect not only encompasses the relationship between the story teller and the interlocutor, but also the site of the telling or the interview. Through 'stories' told, "the interrelationship of time, space and social context surfaces, and the influence which these contexts have on lived experiences and identity formation can thus be explored" (ibid 215). In one of her earlier works back in 1993, Riessman (2008) also highlights this point:

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The story is being told to particular people; it might have taken a different form if someone else were the listener. In this case, I am not simply representing the experience on the beach from some neutral place, but in a specific conversation with a mentor or friend and his partner, who mean something to me. In telling about an experience, I am also creating a self – how I want to be known by them. (p. 11)

This hints at the multiple layering of narrative research, which lead Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to frame narrative inquiry into the following three dimensions that are grounded in Dewey’s principles of interaction and continuity: temporality, sociality and place. The emerging stories of lived experiences of the participants are akin to a rich tapestry of human experience and emotions. As research this is a challenging and complex one to explore. It called for a framework that would enable researchers to present the participants’ stories or experiences into analyzable data. For this purpose, I draw on the *Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure* (Table 1).

Table 1:
The Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure (adapted from Clandinin and Connelly 2000)

Interaction (Sociality)	Temporality (Continuity)	Situation/Place:
<p>Personal: Look inward to internal conditions such as desires, feelings, and hopes.</p> <p>Social: Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions, and points of view.</p>	<p>Past: Look backward to remembered experiences, feelings, stories from earlier times.</p> <p>Present: Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories, relating to actions of an event.</p> <p>Future: Look forward to implied possible experiences and plot lines.</p>	<p>Look at context, time and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters’ intentions, purposes, and different points of view.</p>

The first commonplace, *temporality* refers to Dewey’s notion of continuity in that

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experience can move backwards and forwards; it has a past, a present, and a future reference:

the idea that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum – the imaged now, some imagined past, or some imagined future –each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 p.2).

Whatever is under study, be it events, people or objects, it is in temporal transition. Time here encompasses the co-existence of “futuraity and past in the present, the reconstruction of the past by new presents, and the projection of the present into the future imaginings” (Stanley, 1992; Steedman, 1987 in Andrews et al, 2008). Every experience takes up something from the past and present, and takes it to the future experiences. As Dewey describes, in this respect, experience is something that “stretches” both temporally and spatially. The second dimension, *sociality*, overlaps with Dewey’s understanding of interaction where individuals are always in interaction with their surroundings. There is a simultaneous concern with both the personal and the social conditions. ‘Personal’ refers to the desires, hopes, feelings of an individual, while on the other hand, ‘social’ points towards the environment, surrounding factors and forces. Finally, *situation/place* put emphasis on the place and context where events and inquiry take hold.

One of the features of narrative research is thus to disassemble how an individual’s engagement with the social world impacts social relationship and individual agency in forming identities. It illuminates the interplay of social, historical and spatial contexts in constructing and living and perceiving individual lives. The three-dimensionality of experience would thus serve well in describing the participants’ stories in narrative-oriented studies as they talk about their past experiences, both on a personal as well as on a social level; their recollection of the past and how it was re-interpreted in the present situation as well as how they looked into the future, and how it can or will influence them in forging their identities. Narratives thus construct stories of lived experience within the narrative dimensions of time, place, and personal-social relationship. Narratives are thus considered to be an appropriate strategy since it translates the participants’ stories in all their complexity and richness into analyzable data.

Narrative studies and identity

The focal purpose of this paper is to discuss why narrative inquiry appears to be

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particularly suited to explore one's identity construction. In fact, many academics interested in the construct of identity (for example, Bruner,2001; Elliot,2005; Mishler,2006) argue the importance of narrative by explicating that identity is located in narratives told:

- Narratives and life stories are prime settings for identity construction (Schirffirin, 2006).
- When telling stories, we convey to others a sense of who we are, of our beliefs and values (Bastos & Oliveria,2006).
- Without recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would be in fact condemned to antimony with no solution (Ricoeur , 1991)

Here, identity is understood to be constructed in the stories we narrate and re-narrate to ourselves as well as to others. It involves the reconstruction of a person's experience in relation both to the other and to a social milieu (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Identity in poststructuralist discourse no longer regards identity as 'given or innate', individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known in a particular discourse. Identity is seen as something that emerges out of what is said and done: people attempt to create a link to explain events and experiences in their lives. The process of narrating experience is not merely a communication tool, but also one that allows to negotiate and/ or make meaning out of it. This is perhaps the reason why narratives is particularly suited for identity studies as suggested by many researchers (Block, 2007; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Riessman, 1993,2008; Ricento, 2005). As Kanno (2003) and others have claimed narrative is what connects our fragmented, multiple identities since however fragmented one's identities are, there is a natural desire within us to connect our multiple identities in order to provide a sense of self:

Tapping into issues of identity, how one views oneself and relates to the world around one, requires an inquiry into people's experiences and mean making, and an inquiry into those areas calls for the use of narrative.(Kanno 2003,p.11)

Dyer and Keller-Cohen echoes Kanno above by explaining that narratives are an instrumental device in bonding these different selves (Dyer & Keller-Cohen 2000; Linde, 1993; Ochs & Capps ,2001):

Narrative unites the selves of our past with those of the present, and even with the projected selves of the future..... bringing together in a coherent fashion differing versions, each narrative providing the authors with a deep sense of understanding.

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This characteristic of narrative is an important means of (re) construction of identity, an outward manifestation of the ‘reflexive project of the self’... which is sustained through a continuous process of reflection and revision. (Dyer & Keller-Cohen 2000,p.285).

Another important feature to the narrative construction of oneself is that narratives are not complete stories. They only provide *opportunities* to unify one’s various selves. This is more understandable if narrative inquiry is viewed with respect to what Mishler (2006, 2008) coins as the ‘experiential/narrative mode of time’. Mishler (ibid) makes a distinction by proposing different types of time and temporal order:clock/chronological vs experiential/narrative modes of time. The former tends to understand experience as a series of events or simply lists (Labov & Waltesky ,1967), where the latter views experiences as stories. The experiential/narrative model of time criticizes the conventional representation of clock-time where events are lined-up in sequence one after the other. Mishler “emphasizes the significance of a plot, as a governing how a sequence of events are made into story. a plot establishes human action not only within time, ... but within memory” (2008: 33). The “plot” is what people rely on to make sense of their lives, and construct coherent identities through the stories they tell and retell (Clandinin & Connelly 1990; Polkinghore, 1984; Ricouer, 1980). For example, Jill Bell (1997), following her own trajectory as an adult learner of Chinese, describes the several stages through which she progresses. However, in one version of her story, she presents herself as a failure, but in another, she recasts the same experience in a more positive light. In other words, the “events” did not change, but there was a shift in the way she constructed herself as a Chinese learner. This exemplifies that the past is, so to speak, not always set in stone: “The meanings of events and experience is constantly being reframed within the contexts of our current and ongoing lives” (Mishler, 2008 p.37). Bell’s case demonstrates that narrative construction of identity allows narrators to flexibly ‘adjust’ their narratives depending, perhaps, on who it is told to or the circumstances that the story was narrated in. Meaning of an event or experience is contingent on subsequent occurrences. There is the possibility that future events will change the interpretation of meanings of events in the past. Thus, to put it differently, although narratives act as coherence making devices, they also reflect the complex, never-ending struggle of identity construction.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to explicate why a narrative oriented approach is suitable in identity research by putting into perspective 1) how narrative study is situated in

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current language research, 2) how narrative inquiry is understood in this paper, and finally 3) how narrative tradition can be a vehicle for identity research. However, a narrative oriented approaches in identity studies is adopted not only because it informs us of the participants' experiences, but also because it can become powerful 'tools' that uncover the deeply embedded values and assumptions that even the tellers themselves may not sometimes be aware of (Bell, 2002). At times, what people leave out in their accounts can bring to surface and offer us important insights into their experiences that otherwise could remain concealed. Furthermore, framed in the three-dimensional space of narratives, they would allow one to interpret an individual's identity construction in broader terms by viewing it not only as the result of an individual activity, but also as a consequence from its interaction with the social milieu. Narrativity is thus a process which encompasses a person, situation of the telling, and the larger socio-cultural meanings, which are vital and crucial elements to consider in researching identity.

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