

# *A Study on Narrative Research in Language Teaching*

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**Abstract:** As one of the qualitative research methods, narrative research has been widely used in the field of education in recent years, which produces the term “educational narrative research”, and has gradually emerged in language teaching and learning. But is narrative research in language teaching just storytelling? Apparently not. So, who owns the story? Can anyone tell? How should the story be told? It is found that narrative research explores the stories that people live and tell. These stories are the result of an organical combination of society's effect on a person's inner life, social impact on their environment, and their unique personal history. This essay will further focus on answering these three questions and exploring the ethical issues involved in narrative research.

## **1. Introduction**

As a qualitative research method, narrative research has been widely used in psychology, art, literature and so on. In recent years, narrative research, especially narrative research for language learners, has also received more and more attention in the field of foreign language teaching and second language acquisition. Narrative research is mainly used to analyze the teacher dimension in language teaching and learning, usually focusing on topics such as teacher belief, teacher cognition, teacher identity, and teacher emotion. Through narrative research, the researchers present a wealth of personalized teacher stories, which provides a reference for unraveling the teacher group in language teaching. However, there is less literature that conducts narrative research from the student dimension, which also provides us with a new direction for using narrative research in the future.

### **1.1 Narrative Research**

Narrative is any text or discourse, or text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research. Narrative research embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study [14]. Narrative research begins in experience as expressed in lived and told stories. In essence, narrative inquiry involves the reconstruction of a person's experience in relationship both to the other and to a social milieu [4]. Frankly speaking, narrative research is stories lived and told. It contains three types, which are life history, personal experience story and oral history. But to be note, narrative research is more than just storytelling. What matters is the ideas behind these stories and the significance imbued by the story teller. How language, in all its forms, construes meaning and is given meaning is of importance in narrative research [11]

In my opinion, "narrative" is the researcher's textual description of the interviewee's "experience",

and at the same time, it is also related to the researcher's understanding of the narrator's experience. "Research" is the researcher's use of "experience" to deeply interrogate and explore the narrator's life experience in order to understand the logic and laws of human society. Combining "narrative" and "research" is the best way to understand and present experience. Narrative research should not only present the content studied to the reader, but also inform the reader of the process of inquiry itself. Therefore, "narrative research" emphasizes participation in real life, "experiencing experience" in life, and exploring and questioning the past, present and future of participants' experiences.

## 1.2 Research Questions

Narrative research generally focuses on one or two individuals, through a variety of collection methods to obtain the stories of participants, so as to report their experiences, and finally organize the meaning behind these experiences in chronological order. It makes us think, who owns the story? Can anyone tell? How should the story be told.

## 2. Study on Narrative Research

### 2.1 Participants in Narrative Research

Who owns a story? Who can be the participant? It is generally necessary to look for representative individuals or a person of outstanding contribution or status, such as in language teaching research, many researchers focus on novice English teachers, student teachers during internships, or teachers who have won national or world-class awards. These all stem from the fact that these people have research value and the experiences derived from their stories are meaningful. Studying the stories and experiences of novice teachers can help future novice teachers to better adapt to the teaching environment and carry out teaching; Studying excellent teachers is benefit for setting an example for other teachers and lets them learning from good experience.

### 2.2 Storyteller in Narrative Research

Can anyone tell? Apparently not. To qualify as a storyteller, that is, a researcher. First of all, there must be knowledge relevant to the research field. In addition, the principles of narrative research must be followed. Narrative researchers place themselves in the midst of their research in an attempt to recognize the ambiguity and flux of their understandings as researchers in relation to their selves, their participants, and their research contexts. In developing understanding of the storied lived experiences of research participants, narrative researchers often take critical stances while avoiding assertions of what counts as "valid" or "invalid" knowledge [11]. They merge in temporal flows, meeting their participants as full human beings in the field. They take careful notes of the long process, and struggle to represent it honestly and creatively, knowing at the same time, that reality and human beings are much more diverse and complex than what we may write and say about them[1].

However, in this process, participants tell their stories to researchers, who then analyze experiences and meanings. At this stage, the researchers are not a first-hand witness of the story, nor can they fully understand the story, so they can only look at the analysis with his own understanding. Because everyone's understanding is culturally specific. In addition, it is also very likely that researchers think they understand the story and impose their ideas on it, which may misinterpret participants.

At the same time, the relationship between the researcher and the participant may develop into friendship over a long period of time with each other and conversations. Participants gradually trust the researcher and may tell the researcher everything that involves their privacy. This involves protecting participants' privacy, which requires researchers to make trade-offs. After all, protecting

participant privacy is one of the fundamental principles of all research. Research does not lead to the disclosure of other people's privacy. Researchers should respect them.

In addition, where should the relationship between researchers and participants go after the study is over? It is possible to develop friends through a long time together, so how do people get along with each other after it is over? Josselson (2007) gave the suggestion:

Another ethical dilemma the researcher must be prepared for is the participant who wishes to continue the relationship... Where prolonged contact with a community is necessitated by the research, the researcher may be called upon to continue the relationship in unforeseen ways. These become delicate matters of withdrawing gradually and gracefully in a way that leaves the participants feeling honored and not exploited [10].

Researchers should slowly and politely withdraw from contact with participants. They can't leave suddenly, and they still have to follow that rule: research should treat participants with respect. Participants can't feel like they're being used just for research. However, participants also need to master this "degree". You can't be too friendly with the participants, and it is likely that the relationship between the two will affect the results of the study.

### 2.3 Storytelling and Ethical Issues

At last, how should the story be told? Researchers collect data from multiple data sources and then derive lessons through analysis. Finally, they chronologically tell the meaning behind the experience.

There are multiple general methods of research within narrative inquiry that involve the collection of oral, observational, and written narratives or stories. Data comprises interviews, stories, conversations, journals, letters, field notes and observations, biographies and autobiographies, and personal and social artifacts [11]. In the early days of narrative research, many studies were based on a single data source, but later, some researchers questioned and criticized this, arguing that relying solely on individual narratives or other single data sources does not necessarily present a true story. In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the study as much as possible, researchers began to use a variety of data sources to improve the quality of the study by triangulation between these data sources. As to the approach to analysis, they are thematic/content analysis, discourse and positioning analysis, mixed methods and reflections and writing as analysis [7].

Take an article by Yueting Xu and Yongcan Liu (2009) published in *TESOL Quarterly* for example, they study Teacher assessment knowledge and practice and choose a Chinese English teacher--Betty's experience to do a narrative inquiry. In their study, the participant was Betty, anonymously, in order to protect the privacy of the participant.

In the process of data collection, researchers collected Betty's story through three data sources, which are two formal semi-structured interviews, personal correspondence, and personal records. Multiple data sources complement each other and are triangulated to ensure data accuracy.

In data analysis, researchers adopted three commonplaces of narrative inquiry which were identified by Clandinin and Connelly as the analysis framework [5]. The three commonplaces are temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality refers to the temporal transition in which events and people exist. It requires the narrative inquirer to consider an event, person, or object in relation to its past, present, and future. Sociality encourages narrative inquirers to describe both the personal and social conditions of the person under study, whereas place requires them to attend to the specificity of location where events take place. All three strands come into play in settings both in and out of the classroom [17]. Meanwhile, the researchers argued their effects on teachers' knowledge construction of assessment.

Finally, they got the experience and meaning of this study. At the temporal level, the teacher's personal practical knowledge is the sum of his or her experience. In this sense, the teacher's past

experience, present actions and future plans all make up the bulk of the teacher's knowledge; Therefore, it cannot be discussed independently of time [3]. Teachers' previous assessment experience influences their current practices and future assessment plans. Betty's teachers when she was a student liked to use a rigorous approach to evaluating students, so Betty used the same assessment method during her time as a teacher.

In the social level, the sociality of teachers is also embedded in a particular school environment, which itself is in a larger socio-cultural context. Teachers' power relationships in the workplace can greatly influence their assessment decisions. Betty was supposed to give high marks to the students in her class, but what the teacher in the office told her and the principal's requirements for the difference in grades caused Betty to change the scores of her class students to lower.

In the place level, the specific context in which the assessment occurs affects the teacher's sense of safety and thus the effectiveness of the assessment. There are sacred stories and secret stories in teachers' professional knowledge landscapes [17]. In the sacred story, Betty's method of evaluation is influenced by power relations and cannot be determined by itself; In Intimate Stories, Betty lets students make their own decisions according to her own ideas.

As for the ethical issue that is hotly discussed right now, the privacy of participants. Betty's personal information is not highlighted in this document, making it difficult to guess who this person is, and better protecting the privacy of participants. And another article---Wendy Li [15]'s study about unpacking the complexities of teacher identity based on narratives of two Chinese teachers of English in China is not the same. The researchers specifically introduced the personal information of the two participants. Although the two participants were anonymized, the researcher specifically introduced the personal information of the two participants, such as their learning history, work history, and family. These are easy for people close to participants to guess who is specific. It is very likely that their privacy is not well protected. Of course, I can't deny that the participants and the researcher may have reached a consensus, but based on the principle of privacy, it may still cause confusion for the participants.

It is also worth noting that stories are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, and that stories do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives [8]. The social or other interactive situations in which the narrative takes place create the possibility of different narratives.

As far as I am concerned, the formation of stories is influenced by individual, social, cultural, economic, political and other aspects; The same goes for story owners and storytellers. Narrative research explores the stories people live and tell. These stories are the result of a combination of society's influence on a person's inner life, society's impact on their environment, and their unique personal history. In language teaching research, teachers' cognitions of language teaching have changed around COVID-19; Similarly, teachers from four different regions: the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America, have different teaching motivations and cognitions.

Starting with respect for ordinary life experiences, narrative research focuses not only on the identification of individual experience, but also on social, cultural, and institutional narratives in which individual experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and formulated—but in a way that begins and ends this inquiry, involving people's story lives. Narrative researchers study an individual's experience in the world and, through research, seek ways to enrich and transform that experience for themselves and others.

Therefore, we can also conclude that the quality criteria of the method is not fully applicable to narrative research, especially generalizability. The stories and experiences we learn from a particular individual cannot be extrapolated to every person or event, as mentioned above about cultural specificity. Although the conclusions cannot be generalized, the new and universal theories or concepts constructed in the data collection and data analysis methods used in narrative research can

be generalized, as Yin proposed "analytical generalization", which is like a "flowing thought" [16]. In addition, there are still scholars who propose the concept of unique standards extracted from narrative research, such as, fidelity and believability[2] and narrative resonance[6]. The participants in the narrative research, the stories they tell, and the experiences and meanings described by the researchers should be credible. At the same time, in this process, there must be narrative resonance, not only between researchers and participants, but also between the final research conclusion and the reader.

### 3. Educational Narrative Research

Combined with recent research, narrative research has been widely used in the field of education, and the term "educational narrative research" has been produced. Why is narrative research so popular in education? I think there are several reasons:

Firstly, narrative research allows researchers to deeply understand the stories and experiences of participants, pay attention to the impact of the experience itself, and thus get unexpected inspiration. In education, a deep understanding of the stories and experiences of teachers or students can lead to better teaching and learning, improve teaching and learning methods, and raise teaching and learning efficiency.

Secondly, narrative research allows researchers to obtain information that they are not aware of, thus revealing hidden reasons [8]. For example, in Bell's study of second-language learning, narrative research has uncovered deep-seated learning goals, learning objectives, and learning methods that have never been discovered before, which are important for teaching and learning.

In addition, narrative research makes it possible to recognize that one's perception of someone or something is constantly changing. However, there are also some problems in this process, when the researcher is in a hurry to publish the results, they will interrupt the understanding of the participants to complete the study, which will lead to the fact that although the participants' stories continue and their understanding of things is still changing, the researchers' restorying will also change. However, the researcher has to terminate and fix the story, which eliminates some of the possibilities of restorying [9].

### 4. Conclusion

All in all, by exploring these three main questions "who owns the story? can anyone tell? how should the story be told?", and possible ethical issues in narrative research, we can know that narrative research is more than just storytelling, as Roland Barthes [13], the literary theorist, considered that narrative is simply there like life itself international, trans-historical, and trans-cultural... ceaselessly substituting meaning for straightforward copy of the events recounted"[12]. We ought to explore the meaning behind the story and use the experience to guide people's life and other researches.

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