

## **Adventure in a new language: what a first generation Canadian immigrant's narrative holds for ESL teachers**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explored the value of learner's stories for ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers' teaching and research through a narrative inquiry of the lived English learning experience of a first generation Canadian immigrant. It first reviewed the concept of narrative and the significance of launching narrative inquiry. Then, it presented an interview conducted with the Canadian immigrant as a model of narrative inquiry. Themes of the narrative interview were found to resonate with theoretical issues of SLE (Second Language Education), ESL and SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Considering the themes and the entire interviewing process, this paper closed with a discussion of the benefits of narrative inquiry for ESL teachers' teaching and research.

**Keywords:** Narrative inquiry, qualitative research, ESL teachers, L2 learning

### **Introduction**

As human beings, we hear and tell stories every day. These stories depicting our life are also named narratives, which can appear in various forms such as autobiographical writing, letters and conversations, diaries and journals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 96-118). These different shapes and structures of narrative enable people to draw associations among disconnected experiences and happenings to make sense of their life and the world (Cadman & Brown, 2011, p. 444; Moen, 2006, p. 2). For the ESL classroom, learners' stories encompass issues that directly affect their language learning experience (Bell, 2002, p. 211) and therefore can contribute to teachers' understanding of second language education. Recognizing the value of narratives, this paper intends to elucidate how specifically learner's stories of English learning and use enrich ESL teachers' knowledge of teaching and research.

In a wide range of academic disciplines, narrative has been adopted as a qualitative method of inquiry (Bell, ibid; Riessman, 1993) in that it can reveal the meanings underlying people's external actions and open windows into their inner

worlds. Likewise, as Johnson and Golombok (2011) claimed, narrative provides people with chances for introspection and explanation on their life experiences and allows them to disclose their unstated emotions, thoughts and beliefs, which can be examined and used for managing their behaviors (p. 491). With regard to language learning, learner's narrative with its inherent temporal line (Carr, 1986) foregrounds the causal relationship between their current actions of language learning and use and their past experiences with the target language. Understanding this relationship and learner's underlying beliefs and values shaping it enables teachers to "be more thoughtful and mindful of their work" (Johnson & Golombok, 2002, p. 7) and to help students regulate their learning behaviors timely. Employing narrative inquiry, Bell (*ibid*) studied her own effort to develop Chinese literacy, and she confirmed that: Narrative lets researchers get at information that people do not consciously know themselves. Analysis of people's stories allows deeply hidden assumptions to surface. These assumptions had direct implications for teaching and learning (p. 209).

Furthermore, Moen (*ibid*) in her discussion of the use of narrative inquiry in the field of education commented that narrative as familiar and informative thinking tools enables teachers to capture the complexity of the classroom, reflect on teaching practice and develop inquiry questions for research, so it is an ideal tool for teacher education (p. 9).

Given the advantages of narrative and its implications for language education, this paper intends to illustrate the value of narrative inquiry for ESL teachers' teaching and research through a careful examination of a first generation Canadian immigrant's story of learning and using English in an ESL setting, Canada. To achieve this goal, it aims to address two specific questions:

- What issues of ESL education does the Canadian immigrant's narrative inform teachers of?
- What does the Canadian immigrant's narrative contribute to ESL teachers' knowledge of narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method?

### **Method**

Sarah is the girl who participated in this study. She is originally from Venezuela, and she moved to Toronto, Canada with her mother when she was thirteen. They left Venezuela because rampant violence there had made it insecure for them to live their life. Sarah speaks Spanish as her first language and had learnt some English in a general English course at school and with a private tutor in Venezuela before she came to Canada. However, when she arrived in Toronto, she found that she could not hold a normal conversation with a person in English because she did not know how to express herself properly in this new language. In order to improve her English proficiency, she matriculated in an ESL class in Toronto when

she was in grades 7 to 9 of junior high school. She is now a grade-10 student at a Catholic high school in Toronto where students come from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Her current English class at school concentrates on classic English literature such as Shakespeare's works as opposed to survival English topics that she encountered in an ESL class. English as a subject is still a challenge for her, but she communicates with people mainly in English at school at present. Outside school, Sarah mostly speaks Spanish to her mother and other family members as well as friends at a Columbian church that she attends on Saturdays.

Dörnyei (2007) claimed that interview is a frequent part of people's social life because they can watch others being interviewed on television or they themselves often participate in interviews of various types either as interviewer and interviewee (p. 134). In response to the widespread use of interview, Weiss (1994) explained, " Interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life. We can learn about the work of occupations and how people fashion careers, about cultures and the values they sponsor, and about the challenges people confront as they live their lives. We can learn also, through interviewing about people's interior experiences. ... We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships, their families, their work, and their selves. We can learn about all the experiences, from joy through grief, that together constitute the human condition" (p. 1).

Since interview unwinds people's life experiences that are the basic elements constituting narratives (Wajnryb, 2003, p. 8), it is suitable for carrying out this narrative inquiry.

Before Sarah was interviewed, a pilot interview was conducted to refine the questions to ask and address issues that could potentially undermine the actual interview process. Main questions that were equivocal or lacked specific goals were removed after piloting to ensure the quality of data to be obtained. The actual interview happened in a quiet study room at York University in Toronto. Prior to the interview, Sarah was requested to sign an informed consent form, which she carefully read and fully understood. After the interview, the recording of the interview was transcribed with ELAN 4.5.0, and the transcript was emailed to Sarah for verification. With Ryan and Bernard's (2003) theme identifying techniques and Pavlenko's (2007) notion of systematic analysis, several rounds of reading and analyzing the interview transcript was conducted, and salient themes lending support to theories of SLE/ ESL/ SLA were noted.

## **Findings**

Sarah's recollections of her inability to maintain a normal conversation in English during her early days in Canada bring forth the first theme - affect in second language learning. She described herself as "sad", "depressed", "desperate", "tired", and "frustrated". However, she said, "I was really desperate to speak English and to talk with people, 'cause I was really desperate." Her negative

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emotions did not seem to restrain her motivation to learn English, but rather to turn "the learning switch on" (Vail, 1994). This situation evidences that affect not only interacts with motivation in language learning as argued by Stern (1983, p. 383), but also is a fundamentally significant motivator (MacIntyre, MacKinnon & Clément, 2009).

Accent and identity appears to be the second theme identified in Sarah's narrative. "I want the English accent. Sometimes you wanna feel like you're Canadian", she said. Accent or pronunciation is deemed by many scholars such as Labov (1972), Zuengler (1988) and Seidlhofer (2001) as a prominent linguistic marker of a speaker's identity. Lybeck's (2002) study of second language pronunciation of Americans in Norway also shows that learners who have acculturated to (or identified with) the target language community evidenced more native-like pronunciation. This finding is akin to the linkage between becoming a Canadian and speaking the English accent as established by Sarah. Moreover, Gatbonton, Trofimovich and Magid's (2005) investigation of L2 accent in characterizing learners' ethnic group affiliation discovers that learners may endeavor to achieve the highest level of pronunciation accuracy "but nevertheless retain ways of manipulating their pronunciation to clearly signal where their loyalties lie" (pp. 505-506). This finding on accent and group identity wins good support from Sarah's remarks. "Sometimes it's good to have an accent, 'cause you remember where are you from ... You are never gonna forget where are you from", she emphasized.

Another theme derived from Sarah's comments on accent is standard language ideology. "Sometimes I really want my accent ... to go away. I don't want. I want the English accent. I want to talk and not to have an accent. I wanna feel like, my, I want my English to be perfect. My future goal is to get rid of my accent," said Sarah. Her ambition to achieve standard and impeccable English accent seems to originate from what Milroy (2001, p. 530) termed "standard language cultures" which Sarah may have been socialized into. For people in such cultures, they often hold a standard language ideology, which has been defined as a preference for a flawless and internally consistent language which is grounded on the spoken language of the upper middle class and imposed by governing institutions (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 54). The standard language, as contended by Collins (1991), is the product of the dominant groups whose standards are considered as universal (p. 236). Sarah's determination of claiming perfect Canadian English could result from her desire to gain the membership of the dominant group (i.e. native-born Canadians) and obtain access to resources available to them instead of being marginalized as a new landed immigrant from outside Canada. This likelihood underlies Sarah's words - "Sometimes you wanna feel like you're Canadian, 'cause you live here."

The fourth theme is noticeable when Sarah talked about vocabulary being her

foremost difficulty in learning English. "My most difficult thing to get in English is the meaning of the words. Dictionary doesn't give easy response. It's better if someone explains it [the word] to me. Because if someone explains the word to me, I can understand the story, the word," she said. These remarks yield the theme of context-based vocabulary learning. Nash and Snowling's (2006) study reveals that the context method of teaching vocabulary, as compared to dictionary definition method, is more effective in helping children with poor vocabulary knowledge to improve reading comprehension and attain durable vocabulary growth. Nelson (2008) in her investigation of vocabulary teaching also garnered more positive remarks from her students about the enduring benefits of using a context-based strategy for learning vocabulary than about any other strategy used, including looking up definitions in dictionary. Kruse (1979) believed that the context is useful for vocabulary development in that it provides the learner with various aids, such as synonyms or antonyms, example clues, summary clues, experiences clues (pp. 209-210). Likewise, Nash and Snowling (*ibid*) claimed, "Seeing the word in a context provided more information (semantic, syntactic, pragmatic) to create a well specified semantic representation" (p. 350). They added that the context method is interactive and engages the learners more so that it results in better learning. These advantages of context-based vocabulary learning seem to justify Sarah's strong preference for learning vocabulary through stories.

The fifth theme - speech rate and fluency becomes striking in Sarah's repeated mentioning of speaking fast and her learning goal of speaking with fluency. Riggenbach (1991), informed by her microanalysis of nonnative speaker conversations, concludes that speech rate contributes to the judgments of L2 non-fluency (p. 438). Some other scholars have also identified speech rate as one of the most significant temporal variables of L2 fluency (Derwing et al., 2004; O'Brien et al., 2007). Sarah's perception of her speech being "really slow" and her aspiration of speaking "a little bit faster and with fluency" seem to align herself with these findings.

At the end of the interview, Sarah expressed her opinion on the language policy of Canada, saying, "The languages of Canada, they don't need to be English and French, they need to be like, any language, 'cause in Canada, we live in- we are immigrants, right? Most of the people are immigrants. English and French don't need to be the main languages." This comment elicited the theme of multilingualism. At the heart of studies of multilingualism is linguistic human rights, which Skutnabb-Kangas (1998) defines as "the right to identify with, to maintain and to fully develop one's mother tongue(s)" (p. 22). Annamalai (2003) further claimed that language rights include the right for the language of marginalized groups to be used in public domains such as administration, law or education (pp. 124-125). Targeting at equality (Tsuda, 2008, p. 53), requests for

linguistic human rights pose a powerful challenge to the dominant status of English in an ESL setting like Canada. However, Lotherington (2011), a Canadian expert in multilingual education, claimed that developing students' multilingual competence rather than focusing on only one or two national languages can effectively prepare them for success in today's multilingual world.

## **Discussion**

For ESL teachers, the themes divulged through Sarah's narrative may direct their attention to critical issues in ESL education that are bound up with one another to exert a collective influence over the learners, and may give rise to new approaches to classroom teaching. For instance, Pappamihiel's (2002) study that explored English language anxiety of ESL students in the U.S. finds a deep relationship among English language anxiety, identity development and interethnic interactions, and proposes peer collaboration to circumvent threatening situations and optimize students' learning. In addition, Hilton's (2008) study of the link between vocabulary knowledge and spoken L2 fluency reveals that lexical knowledge is the greatest impediment to spoken L2 fluency from a temporal point of view, and advises that secondary language classes should have ambitious lexical syllabus so as to maximize students' L2 vocabulary learning and develop their L2 fluency. Moreover, Garcia (2009), in her discussion of language standardization and identity, maintained that an exclusive focus on a standard language negates other languaging practices that are learners' authentic identity expression, and school's insistence on using only the dominant standard language may aggravate the linguistic insecurity that many minority speakers feel (pp. 36-37). Thus, she proposed bilingual education as a pedagogical approach to incorporate immigrants' minoritized language practices into formal school learning (pp. 312-365). These suggested teaching approaches and methods may not only enhance students' learning experience but also become fresh orientations of research endeavors for ESL teachers.

Apart from informing teaching practice, Sarah's narrative may also expand ESL teachers' knowledge of narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method. It can be understood through Sarah's story that narratives are not merely shaped by narrators' knowledge, experiences, emotions and beliefs but collectively shaped by the addressees and the cultural, historical and institutional contexts in which the narratives occur (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002; Moen, *ibid*). Her story was co-constructed in that the interview questions (see Appendix A) provided a frame within which Sarah shaped her accounts of her experience, directing the plot of the narrative. Also, Sarah's narrative could have appeared differently if the interviewer had been someone else such as her ESL teacher (Riessman, *ibid*, p. 11). Regarding the influences that contexts exert on narrative construction, Pavlenko (*ibid*) suggested examining the impacts at both macro (or global) and micro (or

local) levels, and claimed, "The micro level should attend to the context of the interview" (p. 175). Thus, Sarah's language choice (English as opposed to Spanish), interview venue (a study room at York University instead of her household), the purpose of the interview (for a formal research project rather than a casual conversation), modality (a face-to-face interview instead of an online interview) could have altered the shape of her narrative, individually or collectively. On the other hand, "the macro-level of analysis should attend to historic, political, economic, and cultural circumstances of narrative production," stated Pavlenko. In this sense, Sarah could also have narrated very different stories if Canada's second official language were Spanish not French, or her home country Venezuela were an equally developed country as Canada, or Spanish culture were part of the mainstream culture of Canada. Therefore, when conducting narrative inquiry, ESL teachers should consider the formation of narratives in relation to the context of narration and the addressee.

Furthermore, in light of Sarah's narrative, it is equally essential for ESL teachers to note that narrative research is a continuing hermeneutic or interpretive activity (Moen, *ibid*, p. 7). When Sarah selected one story over many other stories to include in her narrative, she had started assigning meaning to her experiences. For instance, when she was asked to tell life lessons she had drawn from her experience of being unable to communicate with people in English on her first arrival in Canada, she unfolded the meaning of this experience by saying, "I learn that everything has its time. You don't need to press yourself to learn something. You just need to wait." The interpretation of the meaning or lesson of Sarah's stories did not end with her narration but continued during the entire research process, because the researcher, who is the author of this paper, went on interpreting what the interview narratives signify through analysis, reshaping what was told by Sarah and turning it into a hybrid story (Riessman, *ibid*, p. 13). Even when this current research is completed, the interpretation will not finish, because the meaning of all texts is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal, so the final hybrid narrative will be subject to further interpretations by others who read and learn of this report (Moen, *ibid*; Riessman, *ibid*, pp. 14-15). These layers of narrative interpretation corroborate that the power of narrative inquiry lies not just in the interviewer's "controlling how discourse unfolds in the context of its production but gaining control over its recontextualization - shaping how it draws on other discourses and contexts and when, where, how, and by whom it will be subsequently used" (Briggs, 2007, p. 562). Because when themes are extracted from Sarah's stories and elevated as theories regarding English education for the entire population of immigrant ESL students, it is the researcher and a host of different readers who will decide how and where the findings of this narrative research are presented (e.g. a conference, scholarly publications or policy decisions).

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to illustrate that narrative is of significant value to ESL teachers' teaching practices and research undertakings through a careful examination of a first generation Canadian immigrant's stories of her English learning and use in an ESL setting. It is demonstrated that the themes originating from narrative inquiry may enable ESL teachers to remain well informed of issues that are significant in shaping learners' languaging and learning experience and to search for new teaching approaches and fresh research topics. Also, the process of narrative inquiry illuminates the fact that narratives are co-constructed by the narrators, the addressees and the social contexts where narration occurs, as well as the actuality that narrative research is a continuing hermeneutic process. This reality requires ESL teachers interested in applying narrative inquiry to be fully aware that the quality of narratives to be obtained is entirely dependent on how they manage the relationship among themselves, narrators and contexts of narration, and that their interpretations of the narratives are always subject to modification and revision.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

### **Before moving to Canada**

- When did you start to learn English in Venezuela?
- Why did you learn English?
- How did you learn English in Venezuela?
- Who did you speak English with in Venezuela?

### **After moving to Canada**

- When did you come live in Toronto?
- Tell me one or two stories of your English use in Toronto that you can never forget.
- What have you learnt from this story in terms of English learning and use?
- Please tell me about your school in Toronto.
- What role does English play in your learning at school?
- Who do you usually speak English with at school?
- How do you use English when you interact with them?
- What do you think of the English local students speak?
- What do you think of the English of ESL students?
- Do you also speak Spanish at school? Why or why not?
- In general, what are the gains or losses of living your life in English in Canada?
- What suggestions would you give to ESL students?
- What advice would you give to ESL teachers?
- What is your future goal for English learning?
- What would you suggest as a title for all the stories you shared with me today?