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## Opinion and Perspective

# Taking a Narrative Turn: Possibilities, Challenges and Potential Outcomes

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“...a singular story, as every true story is singular, will in the magic way of some things apply, connect, resonate, touch a magic chord.” (Geoffrey Wolfe, 1985, p. 72).

It is now nearly twenty years since Alan Peshkin (1993) contributed “The Goodness of Qualitative Research” (from which the above citation is taken) to the journal *Educational Researcher*. His article focused on the potential outcomes of qualitative research and cautioned against being drawn into playing the scientific game of judging such research on the basis of positivist values. One might imagine that twenty years on, the field of TEFL/TESL would be embracing qualitative research of a genuinely interpretive nature, and that this would be reflected by published contributions to relevant academic journals, such as *OnCUE Journal* (OCJ). However, in the case of OCJ, it seems to be coming overly reliant on research contributions founded on positivist traditions using questionnaire and survey methods. In writing this article, I hope to encourage more submissions to, and publication of, interpretive research in this journal. I call particular attention to the possibilities, challenges and potential outcomes of undertaking single-participant narrative studies that focus on teachers’ *reflective practice* (Schon, 1983) and individual teaching journeys.

The development of narrative research in the area of teaching and education has resulted from a growing interest in teacher reflection and knowledge related

to classroom decision-making and the process of professional development (Cortazzi, 1993). It is influenced strongly by the idea of empowering teachers to voice critical experiences reflecting personal and subjective meaning in their teaching lives. As teachers engage with narrative as reflective practice, the process provides opportunity for them to “explore and understand how different social, cultural, historical, and personal factors influence their educational values and practices and their professional and personal identity” (Gill & Pryor, 2006, p. 288).

The *narrative turn* in the social sciences has been well-documented, including publications on how that turn may be taken in the study of general teacher education and the analysis of teaching life stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Munro, 1998). However, it is only in the last five years that TESOL Quarterly, as a representative flagship journal for the language teaching profession, has published narrative analytical inquiry into single-participant teacher stories. For example, the story of a Chinese learner/teacher’s resistance to the feelings of marginalization within the demands of conforming to a Communicative Language Teaching paradigm (Tsui, 2007), and an exploration of a Chinese EFL teacher’s assessment practices (Xu & Liu, 2009). More recently, an entire issue of *TESOL Quarterly* (2011, Volume 45, 3) focused on the use of narrative data. This issue included Johnson and Golombek’s (2011) application of a Vygotskyian socio-cultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) to demonstrate how teacher-authored reflective journals can be analyzed to explore the transformative potential of narrative as a meditational tool for the externalization, verbalization, and systematic examination of teacher development.

That narrative special issue comes about fifteen years after Suresh Canagarajah (1996), then editor of *TESOL Quarterly*, pointed out that researchers working within interpretive fields should not feel restricted to presenting research in a format typical of scientific methods and should consider creative ways of both doing and reporting research. This view was supported by Holliday (2004) and Shohamy (2004) in responding to what they considered restrictive *TESOL Quarterly* Submission Guidelines (Chapelle &

Duff, 2003). In calling for greater flexibility and less prescription, Shohamy (2004) observed that “in an era when research is opening up to a variety of options, well beyond those included in the guidelines, such a prescription may be perceived as an imposition or a dogma of how research should be done” (p. 728).

Similarly, my own article here represents a call for more submissions to and publications in OCJ of genuinely interpretive TEFL/TESL research studies that offer creative ways of doing and reporting research, given that in the last few years the journal has offered primarily feature articles reporting research using the traditional scientific paradigmatic methodologies (see Apple, 2011; Jones & Gardner, 2009; Kitzman, 2011; Kojima, 2010; Richardson, 2011; Taferner, 2009; Winskowski, 2010; Winskowski & Duggan, 2011). Many of these employ questionnaire and survey formats with statistical inference, reflecting a belief in hypothesis-testing, categorization, and the generalizability of outcomes. Also, these articles are predictably structured around a typical template with such headings as Introduction, Literature Review, Research Questions, Method, Results, Summary and Discussion.

The predominance of this kind of positivistic research may, of course, depend on various factors: for example, where teacher researchers have done their graduate studies and to what extent they have been influenced by instructors who have leaned towards more traditional areas of TEFL/TESL research, such as testing and vocabulary acquisition, which can be conveniently measured. Furthermore, producing a questionnaire followed by a comparison of facts and figures, and an analysis sometimes limited to percentage responses to five-point Likert scales, may be seen as a quick route to publication. One may therefore question whether at times working within the positivist paradigm may be the result of pragmatic choice rather than determined by the epistemological and ontological beliefs that should provide the philosophical foundations of undertaking such research.

Unfortunately, often when qualitative work is undertaken there appears to be a long-held assumption that such research still requires generalization of outcomes and categories for comparison. While the quantitative need to

generalize leads to research with large samples, questionnaires and statistics, most qualitative studies seem to employ a small number of participants, using a cross-case analysis and comparing participants' experiences and beliefs across common categories and themes. Any attention to particularity or singularity is subordinated by the demand of answering pre-emptive research questions under theme-oriented headings. With such an approach the language of *generalizations* used in large sample studies is replaced by that of cross-case *commonalities* among a few participants. As a result, the significant experiences and perspectives of unique individuals still may well be passed over as they do not fit into the convenience of cross-case categorization. As Peshkin (1993) puts it, "Some qualitative researchers generalize timidly, possibly having cut their methodological teeth on the positivist's biscuit" (p. 25), resulting from a belief that they need to express the reliability, validity, and generalizability of research outcomes.

Single-participant narrative inquiry in TEFL/TESL is rare, and it undoubtedly involves various challenges. It often requires an extended commitment of one individual's time and participation throughout the research process, a period of often lengthy and cyclical interviewing and data collection, detailed transcription of extensive narrative data, detailed analytical engagement on the part of the researcher, and considerable researcher/participant collaboration throughout the writing up of the research, with the goal being "to allow us to tell and analyze a fascinating and illuminating story" (Bell, 2011, p. 580). This kind of research is experience-centered and takes a holistic, content-oriented approach, usually looking at extensive narratives or teaching life stories, and as such, points to the "experiential richness and reflectiveness" (Phoenix, 2008, p. 8) involved by taking into account the big picture (see Bamberg, 2004, 2006, for the *small* and *big* stories distinction). The autobiographical content of *big* stories becomes the unit of analysis, and as the life stories we tell may tend to define a coherent sense of self both at a personal level and for others, and are a reflection of our attitudes, beliefs, behavior and values, various writers have come to describe them metaphorically as the *stories we live by* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Heilbrun, 1988; McAdams, 1993).

Taking a narrative research stance, of course, makes some fundamental philosophical assumptions about knowledge and reality, which place it firmly within the interpretive mode of research. Its epistemological stance strongly rejects the objectivism inherent in the positivist paradigm in favor of viewing human knowledge and meaning as being personally and socially constructed. Often termed as *constructionism* (Crotty, 1998; Pring, 2000), this viewpoint sees knowledge as “dependent on the knower and his/her context” (Ernest, 1994, p. 36), and is supported by a relativist view of ontology that recognises *multiple realities* and rejects the notion of absolute truths.

Furthermore, as single-participant narrative research often focuses on the conflicting, contradictory and fragmentary aspects of human identity and experience, researchers often draw on Foucauldian postmodernist thinking for its philosophical foundations. Highlighting themes of complexity and difference, leading to an acceptance of multiplicity and unresolved tensions, both in personal and professional life, represents a viewpoint that rejects convenient categorization and classification, fully embraces subjectivity, and frees us from “the dilemma of being either for or against” (Foucault, 1988, p. 154). For many researchers, being open to conflict and contradiction is seen as both principle and rationale behind the undertaking of such research, in that it can result in being able “to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other” (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008, p. 1).

As we begin to analyze life stories, we are faced with the question of how information is revealed. With extensive narrative data the process of analysis can seem an overwhelming undertaking, being “susceptible to endless interpretation, by turns inconsequential and deeply meaningful” (Squire et al., 2008, p. 1). Riessman (2008) emphasizes the need for the kind of “close reading” (p. 153) of the literary scholar, the kind of attention to detail that might elicit irony, ambiguity, foretelling, symbol and metaphor, like signs and signposting inserted by the narrator, either at a conscious or subconscious level as a means of aiding our interpretation. Researchers also attend to recurrent themes or motifs, which may be embedded in different episodes (Phoenix,

2008).

Pointing to its *dual* nature, Toolan (2001) notes that when reading a narrative “part of the experience is the activity of ‘reading’ or scrutinizing the character of the teller” (p. 1) as well as attending to the events or the story itself. Narrators may well embed their own ideological perspectives and interests into their personal life stories (Langellier, 1989). Consequently, with narrative analysis, as Josselson (2004) observes, “the epistemological praxis relies on hermeneutics, a disciplined form of moving from text to meaning” (p. 3). For Ricoeur (1981) this interpretive process involves taking either a *restoration* or *demystification* approach. The first of these, restoration, can also be described as a hermeneutics of *faith* in that the researcher’s role is one of “distilling, elucidating, and illuminating the intended meanings of the informant” (Josselson, 2004, p. 5). Conversely, the demystification approach can also be seen as a hermeneutics of *suspicion*, whereby the researcher’s attention is focused on “the omissions, disjunctions, inconsistencies, and contradictions in an account” (Josselson, 2004, pp. 14-15). Furthermore, Bruner (1987) has pointed out that the personal and reflexive nature of narrative inevitably creates certain dilemmas, not least “the autobiographical narrator’s irresistible error in accounting for his acts in terms of intentions when, in fact, they might have been quite otherwise determined” (p. 13).

Given such analytical considerations in undertaking interpretive research which focuses on a single participant narrative and on the particularity and uniqueness of one individual’s teaching life experiences, the question arises of what valuative criteria may be used that allow researchers to demonstrate the quality of knowledge outcomes and a rigorous research process. In rejecting reliability and validity as inappropriate standards for evaluating life story outcomes, Atkinson (1998) emphasizes that “historical truth is not the main issue in narrative; telling a story implies a certain, and maybe, unique point of view” (p.60). In addressing the question “How are we to evaluate a narrative analysis?” Riessman (1993, pp. 64-68) points to reconceptualizing validity and offers four criteria for the validation of narrative research, focusing on *trustworthiness* rather than scientific *truth*. The first of these criteria, *persuasiveness*,

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requires that readers should be able to assess whether both the story told and the interpretations given, by participant and researcher, seem reasonable and convincing. Gergen (1985) suggests that whether readers are convinced of the value of a narrative analysis depends on the “analyst’s capacity to invite, compel, stimulate, or delight the audience” (p. 272). Furthermore, as Riessman (1993) notes, it is the researcher’s writing practices and style in communicating effectively and rigorously that will ultimately determine whether readers are persuaded of the significance of the participant’s experiences, and of the researcher’s interpretations.

Keeping in mind that the narrator/participant is offering what they consider to be “a truthful and thorough representation” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 59), then that person should be given the opportunity to comment on the researcher’s representations and interpretations of their life story. Riessman’s (1993) second criterion of *correspondence*, also referred to as *corroboration* (Atkinson, 1998) and *respondent validation* (Measor & Sikes, 1992), involves checking back with the narrator to verify their story, its events, its significance, and its interpretations. Providing the narrator/participant with complete and accurate transcripts, examples of report writing in progress for approval, as well as getting them to reflect on the researcher’s analysis of their experiences, will all inevitably aid the corroboration and collaborative process. While involving the participant in this way has significance for determining the quality of knowledge outcomes, it also meets research requirements in terms of paying attention to ethical considerations. Furthermore, a participant’s responses during this process can further generate data, widen the analysis, and provide further insights and understandings.

There is also the question of a narrative demonstrating an internal consistency (Atkinson, 1998), or the criterion that Riessman (1993) terms *thematic coherence*. This means that the narrative, the story told, makes sense, that it is logical and that it reflects the participant’s interpretation of how “the past, the experienced present and the anticipated future is presently understood by that person” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 60), and whereby there are “recurrent themes that unify the text” (Riessman, 1993, p. 67). As we seek to make meaning of

our lives by finding connections or relating past experiences to the present and future, the stories we tell should also reflect this interconnectedness. Those researchers, however, who are interested in attending to personal conflict and contradiction in identity studies may, of course, question the applicability of this criterion.

Finally, as an aspect of transparency, another essential criterion of setting valuative standards for life story research is *pragmatic use* (Riessman, 1993). That is, as much as is practically possible within research writing limitations, narrative researchers should try to make their research processes, purposes and agendas as visible as possible to the reader. This will involve giving whatever information seems appropriate in assisting the reader to assess the trustworthiness of a study, including how interpretations of the data are reached, and even making primary data available. For example, the researcher can make it clear that full transcripts are available for access by readers if requested. Quinlan (1996) points to other important aspects of providing transparency, such as the researcher making explicit the nature of the researcher/participant relationship, as well as the stories the researcher is living at the time of writing up the study.

This consideration of valuative criteria naturally leads to reflecting on the nature of potential research outcomes and contributions to knowledge of single participant narrative research. As such, the questions that arise are “Does meaning making become knowledge? What counts as knowledge?” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 395). Clearly, in single-participant narrative analytical research, which embraces the particularity and uniqueness of an individual’s teaching journey and the researcher’s subjective positioning, knowledge claims will be significantly different to those founded on the more traditional generalizations of positivistic research or even the cross-case commonalities of other approaches. Narrative research entails a “search for a different kind of knowledge, knowledge which empowers rather than making possible prediction and control” (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997, p. 78), reflected in a narrator’s “opportunity for professional self-enhancement” (Mearor & Sikes, 1992, p. 217), and in assisting teachers to become “more aware of, and thus



understanding better, themselves and their practices” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 394).

As a teacher engages with a narrative of their teaching life experiences, articulating their rationale and principles, they can produce a depth and complexity of teacher thinking and self-reflection. In following Dewey (1933), Johnson and Golombek (2002) have observed that to have educative experiences teachers need to engage in a mind-set of open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. They suggest that when teachers inquire into their experiences with this set of attitudes, which means seeking alternatives, recognizing consequences, and continual self-examination, “they individually and collectively question their own assumptions as they uncover who they are, where they have come from, what they know and believe, and why they teach as they do” (p. 5). This engagement provides the *reflective practitioner* with the opportunity to piece together, consciously or subconsciously, significant teaching life episodes into a meaningful and coherent narrative of their professional development, which is in itself a process of professional development (Gill & Pryor, 2006), and something that Barkhuizen (2011) would include as *narrative knowledging*.

While narrators engage in the process of narrative knowledging in relating their stories, narrative researchers engage in the systematic analysis of the insights and assumptions illustrated and embedded in the narration. In this process, the researcher’s role is to bring out the participant’s story to engender fuller self-understanding, and through presentation of the story and its interpretation, making a contribution to increased knowledge of understanding teacher experience. As Riessman (2008) points out, “no story speaks for itself but instead requires interrogation and contextualization” (p. 154). Also, as researchers undertake such a role, “there are times when we may react from a very personal place, maybe because what the person has said connects deeply with part of our own experience” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 65), or as Wolfe (1985) observes, “a singular story, as every true story is singular, will in the magic way of some things apply, connect, resonate, touch a magic chord” (p. 72).

In this article I have suggested that OCJ needs to present a more balanced representation of ways of doing and reporting research in the field of TEFL/ TESL, ranging from the traditional scientific approaches guided by positivist values (which appears to have become so predominant in the journal recently) to the more radical interpretive approaches which value subjectivity and human complexity, such as single-participant narrative research that I have outlined here. In doing so, I hope that I may be encouraging budding researchers to consider taking a narrative turn and exploring the challenges, possibilities, and potential outcomes that can emerge in the exploration and insights into one individual's personal teaching journey.

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- Scheduling proofreading of completed articles in all sections of OCJ.
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- Soliciting proofreaders and reviewers.
- Improving the CUE homepage section on OCJ as needed.
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